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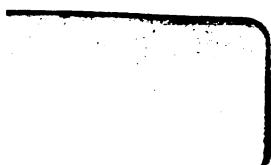
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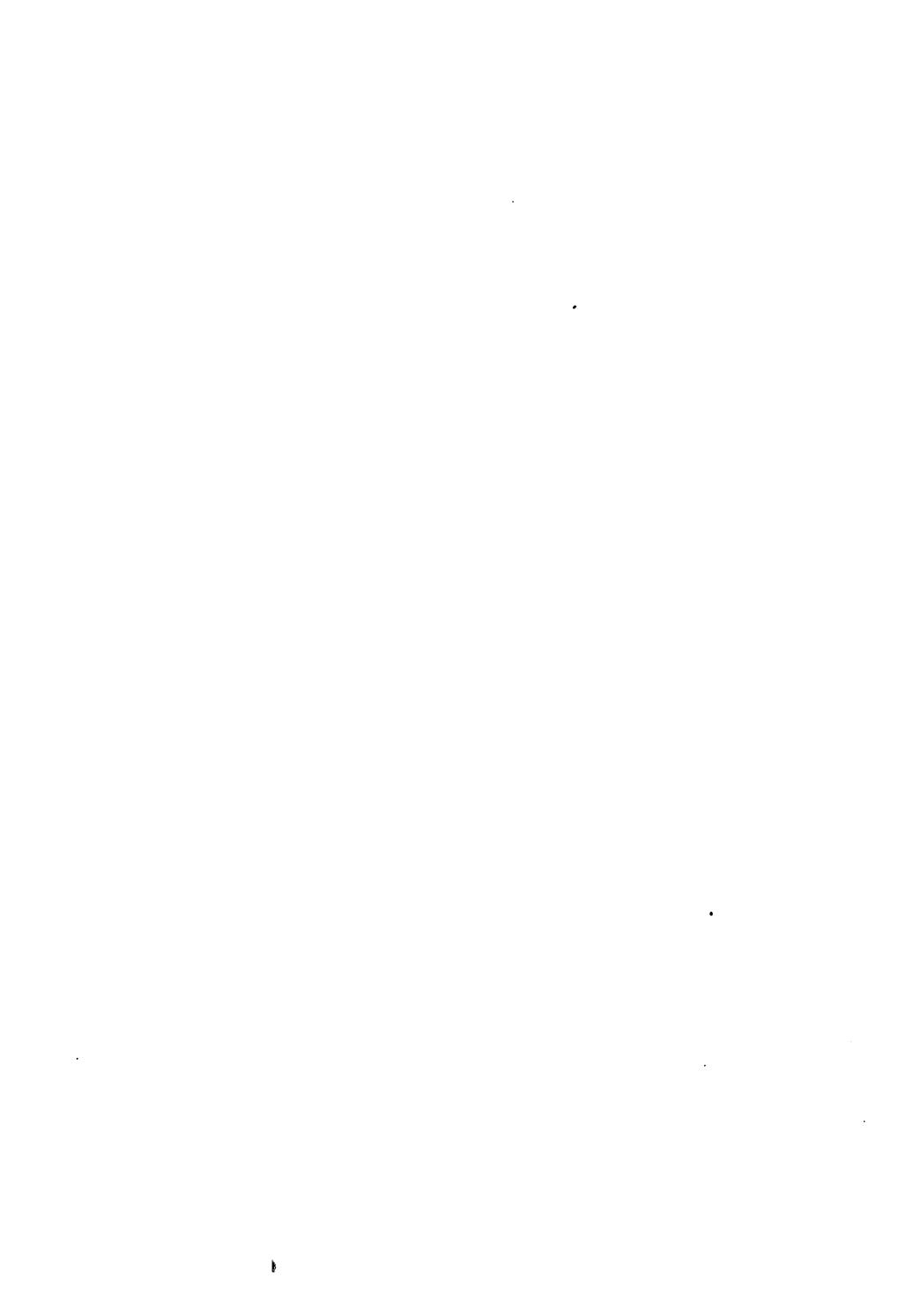


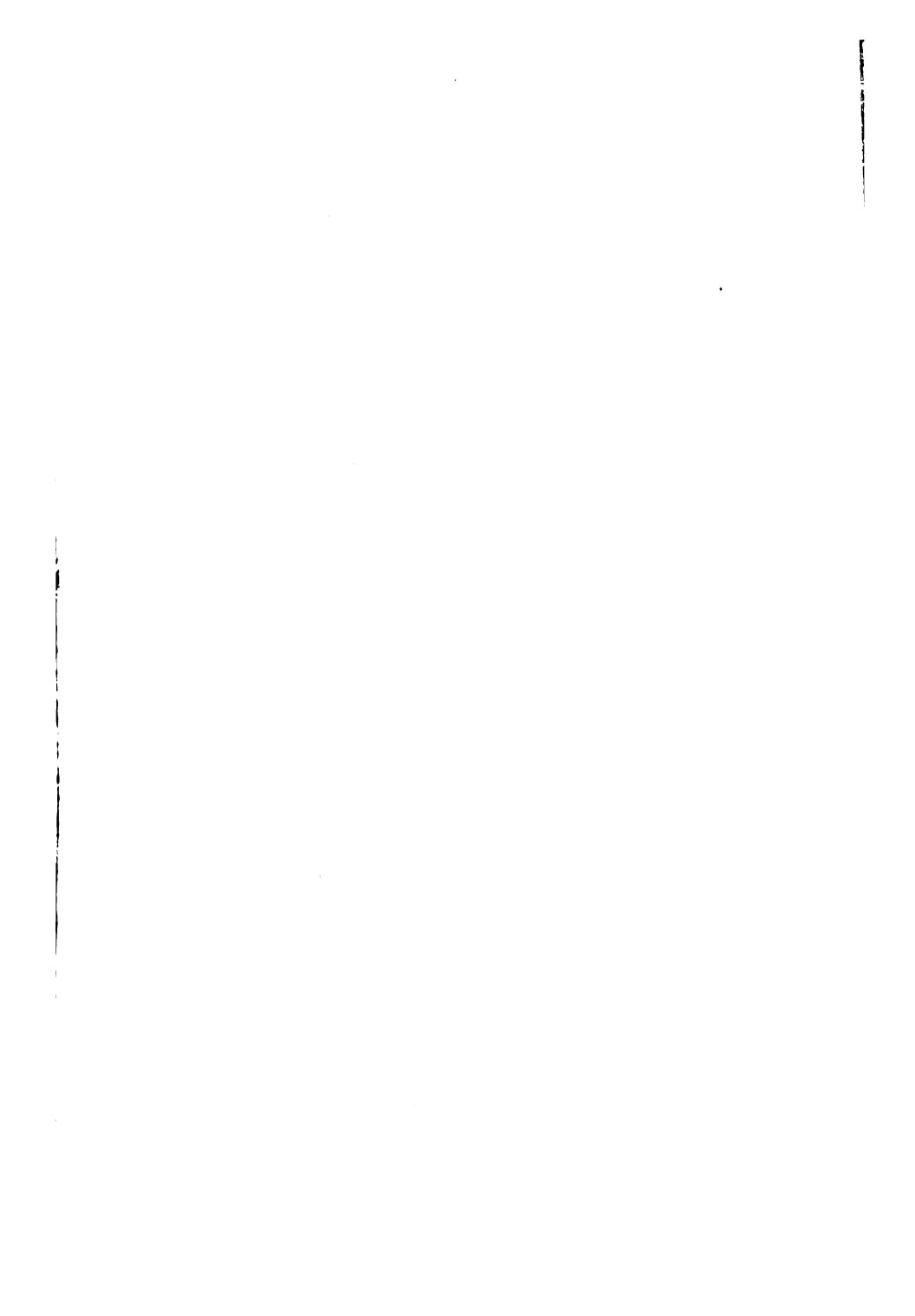
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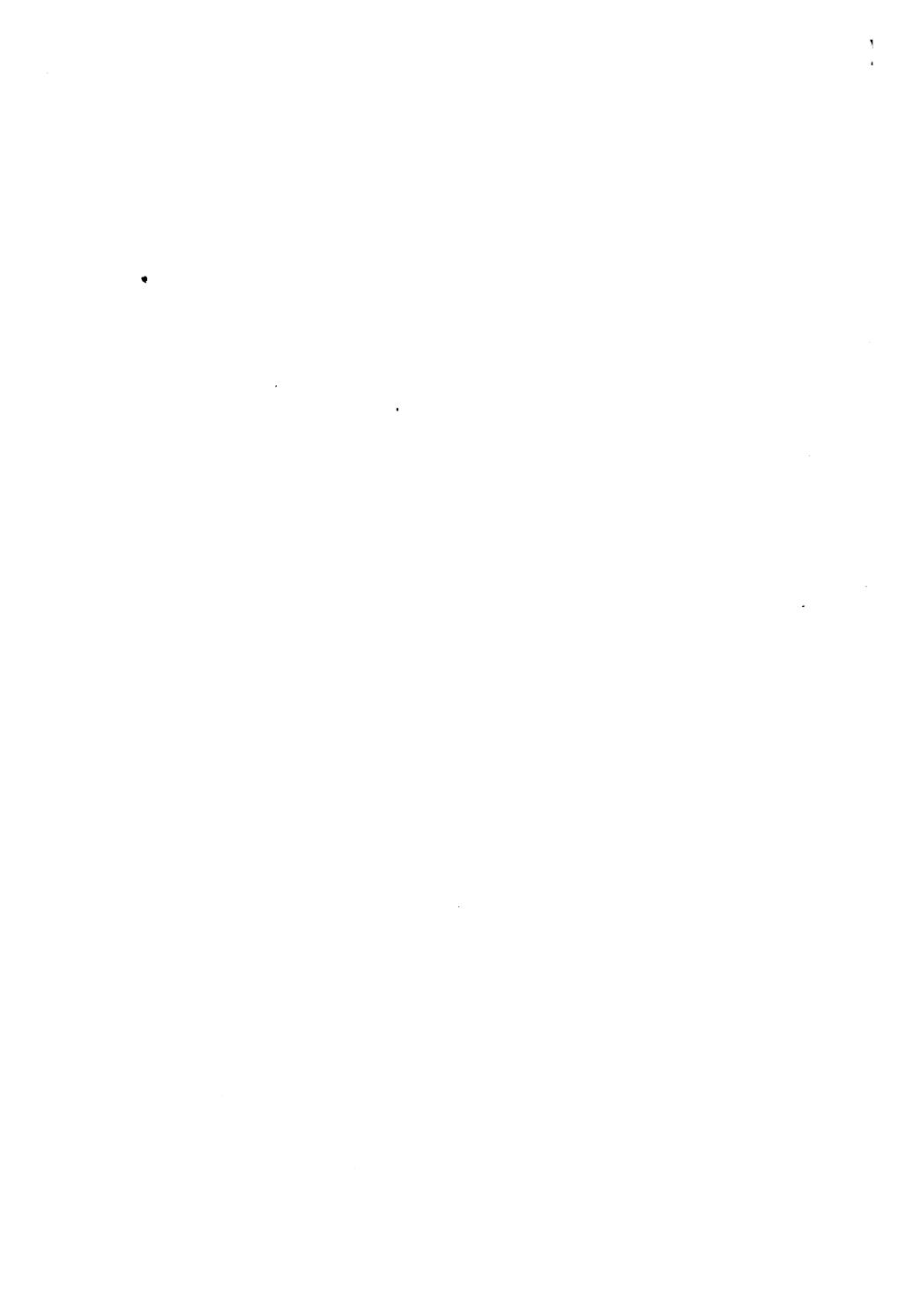






MOTHERS-IN-LAW

***The* BARONESS VON HUTTEN**



MOTHERS-IN-LAW

BY

The BARONESS VON HUTTEN

AUTHOR OF "HAPPY HOUSE," "HELPING HERSEY," "PAM,"
"KINGSMANDE," ETC.



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GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

1912
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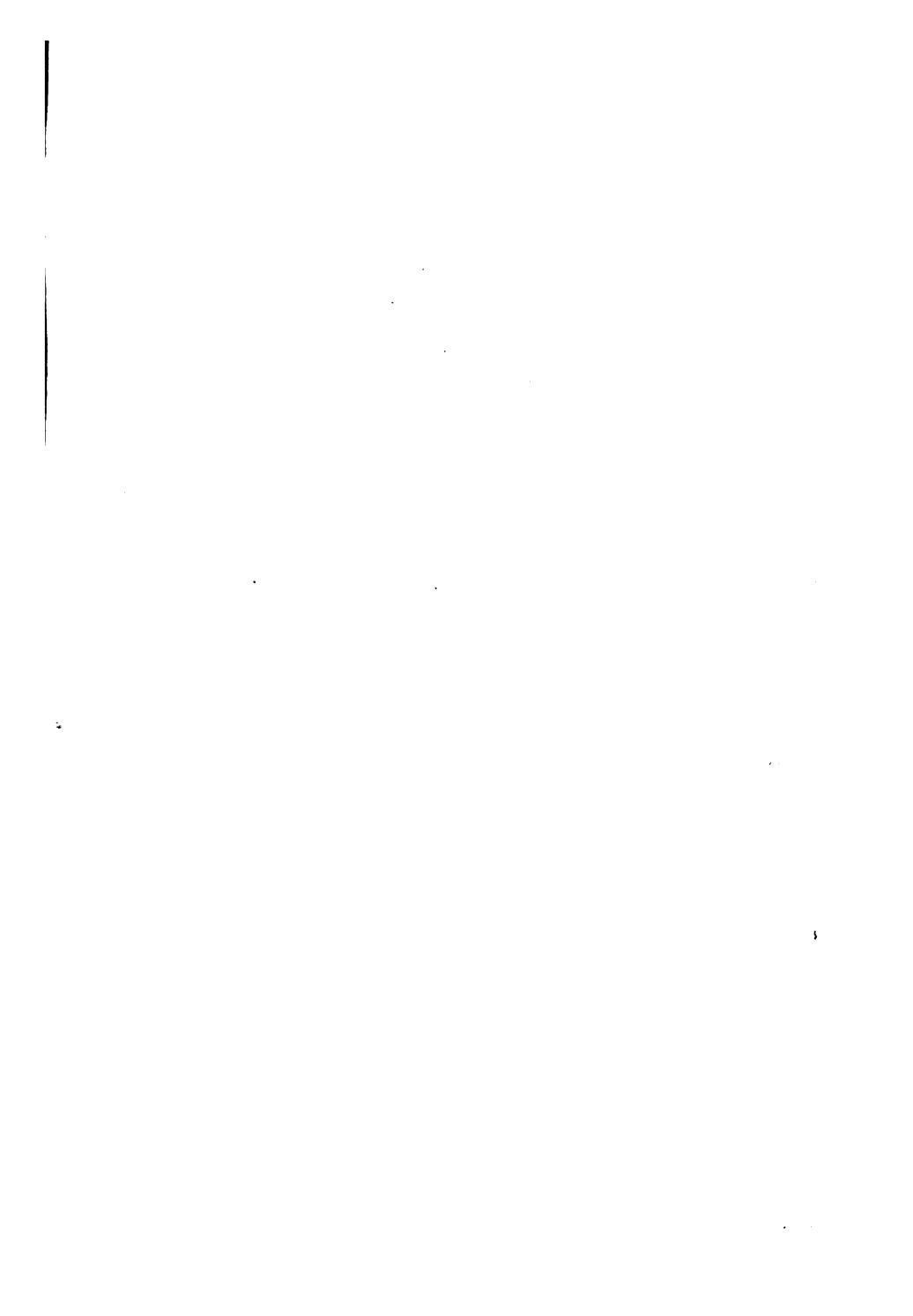
BEST OF BROTHERS, BEST OF FRIENDS

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Oberammergau, May, 1921.



MOTHERS-IN-LAW
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PART ONE



MOTHERS-IN-LAW

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

LITTLE Mrs. Roper came out of the pension door just as the clock of Sant' Onofrio struck nine. It was a splendid, golden morning in March, and already the strength of the sun was drawing a cloud of mixed scents from the grilling flowers in the hillside garden. The heliotrope that crowned the high walls was particularly fragrant, and Leporello, the pension monkey, who had clambered to the top of the biggest fig tree, had reached over and pulled a tuft of the purple blossom, and was sniffing it ecstatically.

Mrs. Roper stood still for a moment at the top of the steps and watched the monkey, who returned her gaze with an irritated chatter and a glare of mingled derision and hatred. Beyond him she saw a vast stretch of fluted or flat roofs, broken by thick clumps of tree-tops, patches of the intensely blue blue of the Mediterranean, black spears that were stone-pines, sheets of flame-coloured or white creepers, trained in the delightful southern way over upper walls, all transfigured by the splendour of the sun.

And Leporello, before he rudely turned his back on her, saw, for his part, a slim, graceful little white figure,

topped by an apple-green hat that delightfully dimmed, without exactly shadowing, an almost classically perfect face. Very pretty indeed was Mrs. Eustace Roper, formerly of America, now, with some vagueness, of Europe.

There were pearls in her small ears under the clustering, naturally curly, naturally gold-coloured hair, real pearls; round her bare white throat was a necklace of medium-sized, well-matched pearls; false ones. Her gloves were as white as snow-wreaths, her narrow high-heeled shoes matched the gloves, and her linen coat and skirt were without a wrinkle, as indeed they should have been, for she had got up at seven to iron them secretly with her treasure of an electric iron.

Her apple-green silk sunshade on her shoulder, her gold mesh purse swinging from her hand, she walked down the path to the garden door which led to the steep short-cut to the shops.

An old man who was nailing an untidy, flowering creeper to a newly mended pergola, looked up as she passed him and bade her good morning.

She nodded and smiled, her charming upper lip curving upwards over her gleaming teeth, and answered him in fluent, incorrect Neapolitan dialect. Then she asked how his wife's legs were, and his grandson's new tooth, and with another nod tripped through the door and closed it with a bang that drew a nervous and vindictive curse from the sensitive Leporello, now engaged in squeezing the green figs to see if they were ripe.

The short cut led through a deserted garden in which anemones still lingered in the fretted shade of ancient olive trees, past a dingy little church in which a sleepy priest was refreshing himself with snuff as he droned



out Mass to a congregation of six, counting the sacristan; through a cool, narrow passage between a house and an orphan asylum, out into a filthy back street full of decayed mud, and strident with the furious-sounding voices of lazy Neapolitans.

The street smelt of cheap fish being fried, of chianti, a cask of which was being broached outside a trattoria by two almost black men with hairy chests and arms; of heliotrope, gusts of which hot scent came over a high wall; and of goats.

Mrs. Roper sniffed, half in disgust, half in appreciation, as she picked her way over the muddy stones, conscious of the admiring glances lavished on her by the beauty-loving Italians, and half-way down the street she turned sharp to the right and clattered down a long flight of very steep stone stairs leading to the Piazza Sant' Onofrio, out of whose dusky church, as she neared it, came the sound of the bell of the elevation of the Host, and a puff of incense.

The church of Sant' Onofrio is a modern one, badly built, and worse decorated in a pseudo rococo style full of meaningless garlands and what Mrs. Roper, feeling very wicked, once called "bottomy" angels, and Mrs. Roper, who was one of Baedeker's most fervent followers, had never been inside it, and never meant to go. She hurried on through the now better streets towards her goal, walking so lightly in her well-poised grace that nearly everyone turned to look after her.

At last she reached the Via delle Sette Nonne, and went into a baker's shop, dark, and warm, and sweet with new baked bread. A vast, bearded woman sold her, with every sign of good will, a dozen little crisp, glossy rolls,

a loaf of brown bread, and six small sponge cakes. These purchases, neatly tied in white paper were put into a string bag of British make and build, and left behind the counter.

"Giacomino will call for them at twelve," the little lady said pleasantly as she nodded good-bye, and the bearded Signora Ginevra smiled back at her.

The young man at the fruiterer's across the way smiled too, as Mrs. Roper chose, without haste and with very keen eyes, a bunch of white grapes, six tangerine oranges, and one large yellow peach—also left to be called for by Giacomino at twelve.

At the Anglo-American Stores a pound of the best China tea was set aside for Giacomino, and finally, at a modest dyer's and cleaner's, two pairs of soiled white gloves appeared from a pocket under the smart white skirt and were left to be cleaned—with the greatest care, mind—and to be fetched, also by Giacomino, the following Tuesday. The young woman behind the counter smiled like all her colleagues who had the pleasure of serving the little American, and promised to be faithful and punctual.

On leaving the dyer's shop, Mrs. Roper stood for a moment in the shade. "Thank goodness," she said to herself, "all those boring things are done. Now for the flowers."

Naples, like all Italian cities, is full of expensive flower shops, but Mrs. Roper wasted no time or money on them. She "had a little man" in the Street of the Seven Nuns, quite at the lower end, near the school, who brought fresh flowers from Portici every morning. Her life was, indeed, punctuated by a great number of "little men" and "little women," who provided her with excellent wares at astonishingly reasonable prices.

At this particular little man's—his name was Gennaro, a compliment paid some fifty years before by his mother to the city's great patron saint—Mrs. Roper bought a sheaf of yellow roses with red outside leaves, a bundle of lilies-of-the-valley, and a sprig of jasmine. These delicious and decorative purchases were not left for Giacomino. She held out her arms, and the reasonable Gennaro filled them with the flowers, laughing gallantly as he pinned the jasmine in the buttonhole of her linen coat. The signora, he declared, was as beautiful as the spring and Our Lady themselves!

The signora was an adept at the accepting of compliments, and her little air of dignity as she said *arrivederci* and left the shop, increased the good little man's respect and devotion for her. *Che bella signora, e che gran dama!*

This end of the Street of the Seven Nuns is very close to the sea, and Mrs. Roper decided that she would, before going home, sit for a few minutes under the trees of the Villa, and rest. In her gold chain bag was, amongst other things, a narrow green book, and when she had found a comfortable bench in the shade, she took the book out and began to read. It was a bijou copy of "La Fille Elisa," but it might have been the *De Imitatione*—

Sir Bartle Sandys watched Domenico, his valet, pick up the shoe-horn that so barely had missed his head, and wished to God the brute would lose his temper.

But Domenico did not lose his temper. He never did. He was a man of smooth olive pallor, opaque brown eyes, and narrow, efficient hands. Now he stood, the big tortoiseshell and silver shoe-horn in one of these hands, his lustreless eyes half hidden by steady lids at half-mast.

"The brown shoes with cloff tops?" he asked presently. He could manage most English words, but "th" was beyond him.

"Yes," answered Sir Bartle gruffly, ashamed of himself.

It was eleven o'clock; Lady Sandys had had her breakfast an hour ago, and was now in the hands of Jeanne, being dressed. They were lunching on a yacht in the harbour, and Sir Bartle, who had dined too well the evening before with a retired British Rear-Admiral, felt gouty and irritable. His face was redder than usual, and his fierce little eyes were full of wrath. Still, he wished, as he tied his tie before an absurd gilt-framed glass as big as a barn door, that he had not thrown that damned shoe-horn.

"I'll go for a walk, Domenico," he said, as he left his dressing-room; "and—you may have that brown hat if you like—"

Domenico bowed and thanked him.

"Tell her ladyship," the old man went on, trying to flatten the swellings in the balls of his feet with carefully gradual pressure on the oiled tile floor, "tell her ladyship, that I'll be back for her at half-past twelve."

"Very good, Sir Bartle."

The old palace was very large, and its corridors seemed interminable to Sir Bartle as he hobbled gingerly along in his tight brown shoes. They had cloth tops, but they would have comforted him more if they had had leather tops and cloth toes.

"I won't go in to see Violet," he said to himself, trying to make less noise as he drew near his lady's chamber. "Can't stand Violet so early in the morning." Then as

he softly turned the corner and reached the broad staircase, hung with portraits of dead and gone Gamba, he whispered vindictively, "Damned ugly, too, is Violet, before she's got her war-paint on——"

At this thought he chuckled, and his old face changed and became rather pleasant.

The stone staircase was very fine, and at the far end of the bleak, empty hall, near the door, an old servant in gay livery slept in a hooded chair.

Sir Bartle did not wake the old man, who had been taken on as an appendage to the magnificent apartment. Aristide was, he reflected, nearly as old as God, and this thought flattered him, for it made him, who after all was only fifty-eight, feel a mere boy!

He crossed the courtyard, nodded to the gorgeous porter who lounged in the arched doorway, and started briskly down towards the sea, a smart, upstanding little figure in his perfectly fitting blue clothes and jaunty grey hat.

His feet felt easier now, and the fresh air cheered him. Besides, Naples was a delightful place and chock-a-block with fine women. He was a very respectable old man, but he thanked heaven he had not been a respectable *young* one, and a certain tinge of the rake had remained with him.

"By Gad! that's a fine girl. Hips like a goddess! Lucky for Violet I'm not so young as I used to be," he mused as he trotted along, his sharp eyes busy. "Poor old Violet, she's only a year older than I am, but she hasn't worn so well as me——"

He was serenely ungrammatical, like many of his nation and class, and he knew it, and was rather proud of it.

He walked down to the sea-wall, swore hideously at sev-

eral beggars, and then made his way to the Villa, the narrow strip of gravel and mangy eucalyptus trees, enlivened by some splendid palms, that stretched along by the sea-wall.

He liked the Villa, though it is a poor enough excuse for a park, and since their arrival from Algiers three weeks ago had walked in it nearly every morning. For one thing, lots of pretty women walked there on fine days, and for another Violet hated it.

Near the aquarium he bought a big red rose from a flower-girl (too fat, but with dounced fine eyes!), and after decorating his coat with it started on again. He had just finished watching a very pretty pair of ankles disappearing round a huge palm trunk when his eyes fell on a lady who, her lap full of flowers, was deeply engrossed in a thin green book.

Sir Bartle stopped short, his face suddenly crimson. He stared, drew nearer, drew a deep breath and took off his hat.

“Surely,” he said, a little quiver in his voice, “I am not mistaken—you are—you *must* be—Milly Roper?”

Mrs. Roper started, and gazed up at him from the green shade of her hat.

“Yes—I am—Mrs. Eustace Roper, but——” and then her lovely little face flushed, and she rose, dropping her flowers (but holding on to her book).

“It’s Bartle Sandys!” she cried, her big dark blue eyes full of delight. “*Bartie!*”

Sir Bartle took her hand in both his. “You—you dear,” he said, sincerely moved. “What *are* you doing here?”

She sat down and picked up her flowers. “We’ve been here all winter,” she said. “But *you*? I was never so

surprised in my life! Where are you staying? When did you come? Why, Bartie," she added, as he sat down by her, "it's years and years—since—since I've seen you."

"Sixteen," Sir Bartle returned with Britannic simplicity. "Sixteen. And—you haven't changed a bit, Milly!"

She laughed. "Nonsense! I'm an old woman now. I'm forty-two."

"Forty-four," corrected Sir Bartle. "I'm fourteen years older than you, and I was fifty-eight in October."

Too sweet-tempered to resent his accuracy of memory, Mrs. Roper laughed and called him the same matter-of-fact old gump he used to be.

He slapped his knee and chuckled. "'Gump!'" How natural that sounds. And do you still 'feed bread to a dog,' say 'mad' for 'angry,' and 'gotten' and—"

"And do you still say 'woken' for 'waked,' and get your 'I's' and 'me's' all mixed up, and say the bell has 'gone' when you mean it's rung, and 'both together'?" she broke in.

They both laughed merrily and began asking the questions usual after a long separation unbridged by letters. He, she learned, had been married for fourteen years—yes, to an Englishwoman, daughter of a general in the Indian service. They had no children, and lived near Cheltenham in a house he had inherited from an uncle.

"The uncle?" she asked, her chin cupped in one hand, her eyes fixed on his. "The one you used to hate so?"

"Er—yes, but that's too strong a word, surely," he protested, for his uncle was now a *dead* uncle, and had left him a far larger fortune than he had expected.

"Not a bit too strong. He gave you such a mean allowance, don't you remember, and you used to call him an old hunks!"

"*H'm!* Well, at any rate, he's dead, and left me all he had. And now tell me about you. Did you go back to America?"

She nodded. "Yes. But Bakerport had changed a good deal, and my mother died, so we came back over here——"

They had, she went on, lived for two years in Tours, "for the accent," then they had gone to Nice for a year or two, for one to Dresden, and on to Florence, "where we saw a good deal of society," and then they had tried England. "We were a year and a half in London, but I didn't like it much. Dismal, I thought,—we had no friends there—and the lodgings were so dirty. So we went back to Parrus. After all there's no place like Parrus—is there, Bartie?" she said archly, adding, with what used to be called a killing glance, "or have you forgotten all about Parrus?"

Sir Bartle leaned towards her. "No, Milly," he said slowly, his eyes glowing, "I'll—I'll be damned if I have!"

He had forgotten poor old Violet, and if he hadn't, he thought, he didn't care!

As a matter of fact he had really been in love with Milly Roper in the old days, and only his utter dependance on the "old hunks" had prevented his making a hopeless fool of himself and marrying her, and now here she was, nearly as young-looking as ever, and he already felt ten years younger than he had two hours ago!

"I was awfully fond of you in the old days, Milly,"

he remarked sentimentally, "and I believe you liked me a bit, too——"

She nodded. "Oh, yes, I did. You were quite new to me, you see, and then your English accent——"

He chuckled. "Yes, I remember your saying that! But you treated me like a dog in the end, you know!"

She became suddenly grave. "I did *not*, Bartle. Your being in love with me, and I—well, being *sort* of in love with you, was no reason why I should go to Morocco with you. It was horrid of you to want me to do such a thing!"

He looked a little ashamed of himself, and sniffed dejectedly at one of her roses. "Oh, well, you were all alone in the world, and so was I——"

"I! Alone!" She sat suddenly very upright and her eyes glowed with anger. "You forget my daughter! You forgot her then, and you forget her now. I have never been alone, or lonely, for one minute since she was born."

She struck him at that minute as very clear-cut, all of her; her delicate little face, her voice, her choice of words, her feeling for her daughter; all were sharp in outline, without any softening, any blurring. She reminded him of an American autumn landscape with its knife-edged hills and trees, as contrasted to England, and to most Englishwomen, with their tenderer but slightly woolly outlines.

"Still fiery, aren't you?" he said, between disapproval and admiration. "No, Milly, you have really hardly changed at all. Tell me," he added, as she was about to speak, "how is little—little—that dear little girl of yours?"

Mrs. Roper laughed and as if the question had wrought

a small miracle her eyes softened, and her lips looked a little fuller, while she answered:

“She is well. And her name is Sappho. Oh, Bartle, you must see her! You really must!”

“I should be delighted to. Dear me, she must be quite grown up by now!”

“Yes. She will be twenty on the 29th——”

“Bless my soul! She was an awfully pretty kid,” he agreed cordially, to please her. “Remember the day we took her to the flower market? You wore pale pink, and we had lunch at Marguéry’s afterwards. Soles, we had, with that wonderful sauce—by Jove! I can remember it all——”

But she was not listening. She was thinking, and when in dismay and disappointment he stopped speaking, she said softly, “Bartle, she is *wonderful!*”

“I’m sure she is—if she’s anything——”

“Oh, I don’t mean her looks. She’s not really so beautiful as I was, but—she is so gentle—so *good*.”

“Lord!” cried Sir Bartle involuntarily.

“Oh, you needn’t look like *that*. She isn’t a prig. She’s very pretty, *very*. And she is very accomplished. She speaks French and Italian perfectly, and sews beautifully—almost better than I do, and—well, she’s a perfectly lovely girl! But lots of girls are that. I can’t exactly tell you, but——”

The little woman’s voice had sunk, and her beautiful eyes were soft, as she gazed at the sea as if she expected the words she wanted to come up out of its blue depths like mermaidens. “It’s her nature that is so lovely,” she went on slowly after a pause. “She’s so good. *Everyone* says so. She’s so kind and gentle and sincere. Why,

Bartie, sometimes I get sort of scared, and can hardly believe she is my child at all!"

She was so evidently sincere in her humility and wonder that Sir Bartle felt a horrible shyness come over him.

"You—you were always a good little woman, Milly," he muttered clumsily. "I don't see why you shouldn't have a—a nice girl——"

She held her hand out to him across the flowers. "You are a dear," she said, "and it's just lovely to see you again. But—when you see Sappho you'll know what I mean——"

CHAPTER II

LADY SANDYS sat at her dressing table, putting the finishing touches to her toilet for driving. Her maid, Jeanne Prou, was tying her veil, and because Lady Sandys was in an extremely bad temper Jeanne could not satisfy her with the veil.

“For goodness’ sake, don’t tear my nose off,” the old lady cried angrily in fluent outrageous French, drawing down her long, prehensile-looking upper lip and letting it fly back into place half a dozen times, thus trying to loosen the delicate lace web, “and it’s slipping off the brim there to the left. No, that’s your right, *imbécile* _____”

Jeanne loosened the veil, pulled it up and tied it again, without any sign of annoyance on her rather pretty, pale face. She had been with Lady Sandys for over a year, and had thus had time to learn not only to understand her queer French, but not to mind her bad temper. Besides, Jeanne Prou was in her way a philosopher, and knew how to appreciate her own twenty-six years, and smoothness and newness of aspect, and to pity her mistress’ approach to sixty, and her rugous and flaccid surface.

“Voilà, miladi——”

Lady Sandys gazed at herself for a moment, and so merciful is the progress of time, so tender are one’s eyes to one’s own physical degeneration, that, pitiable and rather dreadful as her made-up old face looked to her maid, she herself was not displeased with it. She had

not been ugly as a young woman, but years of unrestrained bad temper and self-indulgence had, of course, stamped her face with ineradicable and unmistakable lines, and massage and cosmetics had, as naturally, only made matters worse.

She was also, unfortunately, one of the deluded old women who believe in the rejuvenating powers of mahogany-coloured hair, and tight stays, and her feet, remarkably small, and her only real beauty, she still squeezed into high-heeled shoes of the size she had worn when she weighed three stone less than she did nowadays.

Thus, when she rose and went down to her carriage, her vast, velvet-clad body tottered miserably along, her lips compressed with pain, and her weight was almost too much for Jeanne, on whose arm she leaned.

Sir Bartle, a flower in his coat, a new straw hat on his head, met her at the drawing-room door, and followed her and Jeanne down the great staircase.

“What a ridiculous hat, Bartle,” she said, as Jeanne and Domenico hoisted her into her ark-like hired landau.

Sir Bartle grunted. “Not ridiculous at all,” he answered shortly. “Perfectly good hat—tell him to go to the Pension Bandinetti, Domenico——”

As the carriage rumbled noisily up the street Lady Sandys said, tugging impatiently at her uncomfortable veil, “I really don’t feel at all up to calling on strange people, Bartle. I consider it most inconsiderate of you to ask me to go to see this Mrs. Sadler——”

“‘Roper,’ Violet. I’ve explained a dozen times to you that she was a friend of mine years ago—when I was very lonely in Paris.”

"H'm! An old flame, I suppose, like that appalling Swedish woman, without any stays, in Rome."

"Not a bit like her," Sir Bartle retorted, confused but truculent. "Mrs. Roper is an American, and judging by her figure wears very *good* stays."

After a pause he added: "She has a daughter, too, Vi. Nearly twenty the girl is, she told me. You—you might like *her*—"

"An American! Not likely! 'Daisy Miller,' I suppose," Lady Sandys retorted with a sniff, delighted with the thought that Sir Bartle, who read nothing but the *Morning Post* and the *Sporting Times*, would ask who Daisy Miller was.

But he didn't, because he saw that she wanted him to. Instead, he told her gruffly that she had too much burnt cork under her right eye.

Lady Sandys, whose cosmetics were of the most expensive, looked at him in haughty silence, which lasted till the carriage stopped at the door of the pension.

It was a large, shabby, greyish house, with an upper loggia, and a weather-beaten signboard bearing the words Pension Bandinetti. There was an electric lamp over the door. Domenico got down from his place beside the coachman, and, too bored to take the trouble to look bored, rang the bell, whose clanging was vulgarly audible as they waited.

Sir Bartle was depressed but excited. Depressed by his wife's attitude, excited because he liked Milly Roper, and enjoyed the faint feeling of romance she still roused in him. After all, he reflected, what was fifty-eight?

Violet, he could see, was going to be devilish, but unless he had her call on Milly he could not have seen

anything of his old love without embarking on a career of deceit.

He objected very much to careers of deceit, for on the one or two occasions on which, years ago, he had entered into them, Violet had found him out, and Violet, when she had found something out was, he had said to himself before proposing this call to his wife, just about the most infernally disagreeable woman on the face of the earth. And, after all, sixteen years are sixteen years, and there was no reason why he shouldn't be friends with a very pretty, pleasant, kind-hearted little woman just because—

“No one,” said Lady Sandys severely, “seems to be at home!”

Sir Bartle started, and at the same moment footsteps were heard behind the closed door, which opened to display in the sunshine all the flaws in a dirty, greenish old dress-suit worn by a blinking, dishevelled-looking servant.

“È in casa la Signora Roperr?” asked Domenico with utterly expressionless eyes.

The man shook his head. “Nossignore. La Signora è uscita—”

Sappho Roper was reading in the upper loggia. She had washed her hair, and it now was spread out in dark waves over her white-jacketed shoulders, drying in the sun. When she looked up from her book she could see, through the open window of her little bedroom, her bed with its mosquito netting, a photograph of the Madonna of the Bullfinch, a little black frame containing a faded daguerreotype of her father taken in his youth, and an old ivory crucifix given to her by the Superior of a con-

vent in Tours, where she had for two years gone to day-school.

Sappho, who had inherited from her mother an affection for her environment, loved her bare little room, with its pale-blue washed walls and the blue-flowered muslin curtains she herself had made. Moving about from place to place all her life she, like her mother, had long ago learned to make a home out of whatever room might fall to her lot, and all her little belongings were endeared to her by association, and by gratitude for the part they had played in beautifying her various four walls.

On the little table near her in the loggia stood a Cantagalli bowl full of the lilies-of-the-valley her mother had bought the day before, a shabby American prayer-book and hymnal in a crimson case, Lear's "Nonsense Rhymes," and a Florentine leather writing-case of blue morocco, powdered with tiny fleurs-de-lys. An addressed and stamped letter lay under a paper-weight representing the lion of Lucerne.

At the other side of the table, on a wooden chair, sat Leporello, engaged in inspecting, one by one, with an aspect of gloomy suspicion, a pile of nuts and biscuits that Sappho had provided for his tea.

The ill-natured little brute was not supposed to be liberated from his chain in the garden, but Mrs. Roper was busy with the "little woman" in a back street who made her delightful clothes at such surprisingly moderate prices, and a second discovery of her's who was reconstructing her and her daughter's last summer hats, so the young girl had broken the rules of the house and smuggled the monkey upstairs to keep her company.

Every now and then she would look up from her book

and say a few friendly words to her misanthropic guest, who regarded her with a rather less jaundiced eye than that with which he glanced at most people.

Glancing at him as the sound of wheels roused her from poor little Amelia Sedley's troubles, "What a *good* boy you are to-day!" she said and leaned over the railing.

The good boy chattered in a grateful voice, and jumped up to the railing, for he, too, wished to see what the wheels were bringing.

Sappho saw a carriage climbing the hill, and went back to Amelia, whom (and this throws a valuable sidelight on her nature) she loved and pitied. She was not curious, but Leporello was, and his was a restless, discontented nature, to which any distraction was better than none; so he looked down with much interest as Lady Sandys's carriage drew up at the door, and Domenico languidly descended from the box.

Sappho had drawn away from the railing because of her loose hair, but she could hear English voices, and wondered vaguely if the callers were for Mrs. Caldwell, the general's widow, or old Miss Bache; she did not associate so grand a carriage with any possible acquaintance of her mother.

She sat there, very happy and peaceful, the scent of the lilies in her nostrils, the austere pretty glimpses of her room before her half sleepy eyes, when the lame messenger knocked at her door. . . .

Suddenly Leporello gave an enraged yelp like the snap of a whip, and began to hop up and down on the stone railing, chittering malignantly. Sappho started up, for these things meant mischief, and tried to take hold of him.

"Get out," he snapped, "you let me alone or I'll bite you!"

She understood him and drew back nervously, and the mischief was done. He snapped his whip again and disappeared over the side of the loggia.

Sappho looked down. She saw an old lady, an old gentleman, a fat Neapolitan coachman, and two fat brown horses. And at a glance she saw what it was that had roused the monkey's vengeful ire; the old lady wore a large black lace hat on which was perched a bird of paradise of a delicate yellow.

A few weeks ago Leporello had managed to catch a yellow cockerel, and fleeing with it to the top of a tree, amused himself with pulling out most of its feathers. Giacomo, the pension's man-of-all-work, had finally succeeded in catching him, and his punishment had been swift and dire. Now, it was plain, the monkey's vindictive eyes saw in Lady Sandys's twenty guinea bird of paradise a relation of the creature who had caused him to suffer, and his spirit of vendetta was spurred into action. Frozen with horror, and knowing that when angry the monkey would bite in a way that was painful as well as possibly dangerous, Sappho forgot her dressing-jacket and leaned over the wall.

"Look out for the monkey," she called, "he's going to jump at you, and he bites!"

With a yelp Leporello sprang into space, landing on Lady Sandys' sunshade, behind which she had taken refuge, and before the little brute could get his balance on the taut, slippery silk, Domenico dragged him down and crushed him under his coat.

"It is all right, sir," the man said with an unmoved face.

As he spoke Sappho ran out of the house, her hair hurriedly plaited into a tail, her face white and full of self-reproach.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I'm *so* sorry. I had no right to unchain him, and it's all my fault—I do hope he didn't bite you?"

"No, no, thanks, he had no chance to, my man caught him just in time," answered Sir Bartle; "but why did he attack *us*?"

Sappho regarded him gravely. "It was your wife's hat," she answered, "you see, he thought it was a chicken!"

"My hat a chicken!"

To Sir Bartle's amazement his wife smiled her very pleasantest smile at the young girl. "My *poor* bird of paradise!"

Then she added sharply: "Good heavens, Domenico, what's the matter?"

Domenico, whiter than ever had gone quietly to the house and was now leaning against it, still clutching the monkey under his coat, his eyes shut.

"With respect speaking, my ladyship," he stammered, forgetting his careful English, "he has bitten my thumb."

Sir Bartle was not surprised at his wife's climbing down from the carriage and inspecting the bleeding thumb with sympathy and kindness, for she was by no means heartless, but what did take his breath away was the way she watched Sappho as the young girl silently bathed and bound up the man's hand.

Rarely, if ever, had he seen in Lady Sandys's small eyes such a gentle, tender expression as they had as they

followed the girl's white, deft hands, busied in their simple occupation.

"If she *is* Milly's daughter," he thought, as he tried to hold a bottle of smelling salts under the half fainting sufferer's nose, "she's done the trick!"

He was, however, too wily to do more than watch the development of the situation, and at last he was rewarded by his wife saying to Sappho: "And now, my dear, you must let us know who it is who has been so very kind to our poor man."

"My name is Sappho Roper."

"Roper!" Lady Sandys stared at her. "But—but," she stammered, "you surely can't be twenty! I thought—your hair. . . ."

Sir Bartle, in describing the scene later to Milly, chuckled at this point.

"She blushed, by Jove—Sappho, I mean—and explained that she'd been washing her hair, and then my wife told her we had come to call on you and she asked us to go in and have tea, and, by Jove, my wife, who *loathe*s other people's tea, said 'Yes,' and in we went and out on the loggia, and your girl made tea and we ate all your cakes and—well, I never saw Violet take such a fancy to anyone in my life," he added.

Mrs. Roper held her head high. "I told you Sappho was wonderful," she commented very quietly.

Sir Bartle drank his tea and set down the cup—they were at Baldi's, in a corner by a window, and the tea tasted of hay—and after wiping his moustaches on a remarkably gaudy handkerchief, began slowly: "Look here, Milly, is she—engaged, or anything?"

"Sappho? Good gracious no. Why she's a *child*."

"No, she isn't. She's a remarkably attractive young woman. Wait a moment. My wife thinks a great deal of my nephew, Charles Bruce—it's odd, but he's our only relation except an old brother of hers who lives in South America, and from whom she hasn't heard for twenty years, and my poor old sister Louie, who never married,—and he, Charles, is my heir, you see. Well, this morning she told me she'd written to tell him to come out."

"Out where?"

"Why here, of course, to stay with us. She doesn't know I know what that means, but *I* do. You see Charles was engaged to a girl several years ago, and she chucked him, and he was a good deal broken up about it. Ever since then she's—Violet—been trying to marry him to one girl and another, and he always escapes just in time and——"

Mrs. Roper glanced angrily at him. "He will have no trouble," she said, "in *escaping* from my daughter!"

Poor Sir Bartle was distressed. "Oh, come, you know I didn't mean *that*. It's just that she's—well, she's always been sick at our having no children, and she loves Charles, who's not at all a bad chap, she naturally wants him to marry. Then she's taken this violent fancy to Sappho, and so——"

At the sight of his ruddy, troubled face, so absurdly like that of an anguished baby, Mrs. Roper burst out laughing and rose.

"All right," she said, "I forgive you! And now I must get back. She'll be home by now—Lady Sandys wrote me they wouldn't be gone more than two hours—and she'll want me. We are coming to tea with Lady Sandys to-morrow—good-bye."

She refused to let him walk up to the pension with her, and they parted at the door of the café, Sir Bartle marching back to the palazzo, she turning off to take a short cut to the Piazza di Sant' Onofrio.

But when she reached the pension she found a note from Lady Sandys saying that she had insisted on her young friend's dining—quite *en famille*—with Sir Bartle and herself. "The fact is," the old lady wrote, "my eyes are very bad to-night, and Sappho has promised to read aloud to me till dinner, and her delicious voice will be such a treat that I can't resist, so do forgive me, my dear Mrs. Roper. I am greatly looking forward to the pleasure of meeting you here to-morrow at tea-time."

"I knew Sir Bartle years ago in Paris," the little lady related at dinner that night to old Miss Bache, who was well-born though very poor, and who had various Italian friends whom Mrs. Roper would have liked to know. "It was just after my poor husband's death."

"Indeed," said Miss Bache, with the concentrated, deadly rudeness that the rudest American can never quite achieve.

But Mrs. Roper was not easy to snub. "Yes," she went on pleasantly, helping herself to salad, "Sappho was only three then, and Sir Bartle was very fond of her. She still has a doll he gave her; that was, of course, long before his marriage, and he had not yet come into the baronetcy."

"*Ugh!*" exclaimed Miss Bache, smelling her fish,—she had come in late,—"Signora, this fish is particularly nasty."

Old Mrs. Caldwell, who liked Mrs. Roper, asked if

Lady Sandys was not an Uffingwell, but Mrs. Roper shook her head and said with a pretty air of deprecation: "I am awfully ignorant about such things, dear Mrs. Caldwell, for, of course, I don't know any English people——"

"I remember," the old lady wandered on, "hearing my son talk about old Sir George Sandys—he was an immensely rich man—iron, I think, or was it shipping?—but he was a miser. Used to lunch on an apple and a glass of water. I suppose this gentleman got all the money?"

"I've no idea." Mrs. Roper, though subject to fits of the wildest, most compromising indiscretion, was, in her cooler moments, keenly aware of the wisdom of ignorance.

The old lady nodded. "No doubt he did. Misers rarely split up their property. It will be very pleasant for you to have friends in Naples, Mrs. Roper, and for dear Sappho, too." She beamed kindly at her neighbour and nodded her be-capped old head.

Mrs. Roper nodded. "Yes, Sappho is so shy that she is inclined to stay at home too much. It will do her good to see something of society."

Miss Bache cleared her throat. "I have," she said, "often wondered, Mrs. Roper, why you called your girl by such a singular name."

"I called her Sappho because I knew the Greek Sappho was a very great poet, and because I thought it a very pretty name," Mrs. Roper answered, with great distinctness.

"So it is; so it is," agreed Mrs. Caldwell. "She lived on an island, and there was a man named Anacreon at about the same time. I've heard of 'em!"

"I see." Miss Bache, whose nature was embittered by a fiery red nose that was due solely to indigestion, helped herself to Charlotte Russe and again cleared her throat. "I suppose you know nothing of the poet's character?"

"No," said Mrs. Roper stoutly. "I don't, and if it's anything unpleasant I don't want to. They were all pagans anyhow, and couldn't be expected to have Christian ideas."

"But—"

Mrs. Caldwell, looking as worldly wise as a cream-cake, laughed comfortably. "Now, Miss Bache," she protested kindly, "what's the use of upsetting Mrs. Roper about her girl's name? It's a pretty name, and if the Greek woman wasn't respectable, what difference does it make? Surely you wouldn't have a young girl know that she had been named after a woman who wasn't respectable?"

Mrs. Roper rose. "I'm sure I don't at all mind anything Miss Bache may say to *me*," she announced, "and as far as my daughter is concerned, I have brought her up very carefully, and she wouldn't even understand what Miss Bache means. She has," she added, in a perfectly unconscious epigram, "not the slightest idea what a respectable woman is."

CHAPTER III

DONNA LAURA GAMBA was praying in her private chapel. It was raining, and the beautiful old stained glass window over the altar—the window commemorating her husband's father, who had been killed in a skirmish with Garibaldian troops—looked like a cluster of wet purple and gold dahlias in the thickening dusk.

The chapel was small, but beautiful, and contained, among other treasures, a little Lorenzo da Credi Annunciation, and a chalice supposed, without very conclusive evidence, to be by Benvenuto Cellini.

The altar was gay with flowers and the thickest and purest of wax candles, and the two cinquecento prie-dieu gleamed even in the dusk, so lovingly polished they were.

Donna Laura knelt at her own prie-dieu, her long black figure bent nearly double, and perfectly motionless. A mouse crossed the stone floor without a qualm, his bright eyes glancing at her. She was often there, he knew, but she never startled him by sudden movement. She was almost as dead, to his mind, as the stone man on the cross on the wall.

When Donna Laura had at last finished her prayers she drew a deep breath and looked up, the pale light falling on her drawn, stern face and rigidly waved hair that looked like corrugated iron. For a moment her lips moved, then she rose, curtsied very deep to the altar, and went on noiseless feet to a niche in the wall to the left of the altar. Here stood a modern plaster statue of Our

Lady of the Seven Dolours, and here Donna Laura again knelt, this time on the cold stone floor. Her stern eyes fixed on the face of the Virgin, she said aloud, in a hard unfaltering voice, two *Ave Marias*. Then she added: "These two prayers I say to the intention of my poor husband Guido Gamba and his brother Ottavio Gamba. I beg you, *gentilissima Madonna mia*, to intercede for them. I pray you to pray our Lord God to forgive my husband for his evil life and not less evil death, and"—she drew a deep breath and shuddered with a strongly repressed emotion—"to draw Ottavia from his wicked ways, to purify his heart, and to stop his disgracing our name. Amen."

After a short pause she rose with a sigh of relief, and with another deep genuflexion to the altar, left the chapel, and going down a short stone passage reached her apartments.

As she opened the door of her sitting-room a clock within it struck one, and her maid, a short, red-haired woman with a fixed eye, came towards her. "It is half-past four, *Signora Marchesa*," the maid said. "I have everything ready."

Donna Laura sighed, and going into her bedroom, sat down at her old-fashioned muslin and lace dressing-table.

"Dio mio," she said despondently, "I had forgotten. I suppose I must go, *Marietta*?"

Marietta, who had taken up a tail-comb and was unnecessarily smoothing her mistress's well-oiled and elaborately dressed black hair, nodded with decision.

"Eh, diamine! Si, the *Signora Marchesa* must go, of course," she returned. "If she did not, *il signorina* would be very angry!"

Donna Laura did not answer. She was looking with impassive disapproval at her own face in the oval glass. It was an equine face that she saw, the ivory skin of which looked too tightly drawn over its bony surface. Deep lines scored the too high, too narrow forehead, and ran from the nostrils to the ends of the long straight lips—lips that in her unconsciously sardonic expression gave her an odd resemblance to Pope Leo XIII.

Her eyes were very large and as nearly black as human eyes can be—perhaps only snakes' eyes can be really black and lightless—and deeply sunk in her head beneath quite smooth but oddly flat lids.

Even as a young woman the Marchesa Gamba had been plain, and now she was really ugly, but when, at some remark of the cheerful Marietta, she smiled, her face softened and had a look of pathetic, wounded sweetness. It was the face of a woman whose heart had been broken years before, and whose conscientiously carried out task had since then been that of bearing an intolerable burden without wincing.

“The valet of the Sir Inglesi is a very well-educated man,” Marietta went on, as she slipped a shabby black velvet skirt over her mistress's head, and by well-educated she meant good-mannered and proper-behaved; “the signora's maid, the fat French girl, is trying to marry him. She is a civetta, like all French women——”

Donna Laura knew that Marietta told her such gossip in order to distract her mind from her troubles, so she had given up correcting her; she simply did not answer, and buttoned her bodice with an expressionless face.

Her black velvet was worn and old-fashioned, but the Genoese point lace that she knotted carelessly round her

throat was exquisite and of immense value, though a little dingy, and the huge solitaire diamonds in her ears, hideously unbecoming though they were, were splendid. Donna Laura, quite without vanity of any kind, would as soon have thought of going without her chemise as without her earrings.

"I will go down now, Marietta," she said, when she had slipped over her head the cheap gold chain on which hung the tortoiseshell lorgnon without which she could scarcely see across the room. "If the signorino should come upstairs, tell him where I am. And, Marietta," she turned at the door, "remind him that the Contessa Pandolfi and the Contessina are coming to dinner."

There was an odd diffidence in her voice, and the little frizzy-headed maid answered her with a sprightly smile plainly meant to be comforting. "Si signora, I'll remind him! Ah, the two young countesses! How charming they are, and how rich! Ah, our signorino will be very happy with one of them some day!"

The marchesa's tragic face melted a little and she smiled. "Ah, yes, and he must, he *will* make up his mind soon," she said, with the openness usual in Italians towards a trusted servant. "I thought on Sunday it would be Contessina Gilda—she is so musical, you know."

Marietta shook her red head enthusiastically. "Speaking with respect, Signora Marchesa, I think it will be the Contessina Livia—her skin is better, and the signorino is *very* particular about complexions."

In spite of herself Donna Laura could not help feeling a little encouraged in her hopes by her maid's confidence, and as she went down the chilly stairs to what she called

the *pian nobile* and the Sandys "the drawing-room floor," she looked less grim than usual.

Going out to tea was dreadful to her, for like most old-fashioned Italians, she took tea only when she had a cold, and as she knew little English, and the Sandys no Italian, and Lady Sandys almost no French, the conversation did not promise to be one of untrammelled delight, but it was her duty to go to tea with her extremely profitable lodgers, and she had never in her life wilfully avoided a duty.

The rainy evening was so dark that the drawing-room was flooded with electric light, though the high windows, to Donna Laura's amazed horror, were open.

By the immense stone fireplace over which, on a shield the size of a small room, was carved the Gamba arms, stood Lady Sandys's tea-table, all damask and solid British silver. Lady Sandys, in a smart brown tea-gown trimmed with lace and sables, sat behind it, a tall Spanish comb in her mahogany-coloured hair and long jade ear-rings dangling from her ears.

She rose politely and greeted her guest, Sir Bartle emerged from a vast, green-brocaded chair and shook hands with the marchesa, and then they all sat down; Lady Sandys rang for tea, and the two old women talked, and furtively inspected each other.

There was not much difference in their ages, but no two women alive could have been in greater contrast to each other. Oddly enough, as they laboriously conversed in a mixture of bad French and more correct but more limited English, they did not dislike each other. Instead of this, each of them was conscious of a half-pitying contempt for the other.

"Poor old thing, *how plain she is*," thought Lady Sandys, "*and what clothes!*"

Whereas Donna Laura thought, "How can an old woman wear such absurd clothes, and paint her poor old face like that!"

Sir Bartle, who was bored to death, fidgeted in his chair, looked at his watch, and every now and then turned to the door at the far end of the vast, half-empty room.

"My son will give himself the honour of arriving soon," Donna Laura said at length, as Domenico, his thumb neatly shielded by a snow-white glove-finger, hung the kettle deftly over the spirit lamp.

"Cela," returned Lady Sandys, "sera—er—delightful. He has been away, the marquis, has he not?"

"Yace. In Rome. He is often in Rome, where he has many friends."

Sir Bartle groaned. Damned heavy going, he told himself.

Domenico now brought in a huge tray full of sandwiches and cakes as nearly like the sandwiches and cakes of old England as money could obtain in Naples, and Sir Bartle, again looking at his watch, said in a voice of some anguish as his wife began to rearrange the cups more to her liking, "Hadn't we better wait a little longer, Violet?"

"What for?" she answered, in a voice that Donna Laura considered most unsuitable from a wife to her husband.

"Why—for Mrs. Roper and her daughter."

"Oh! I thought you must mean for the marquis. Mrs. Roper knows that tea was to be at five, and it's now ten past."

As she spoke the door opened and Milly Roper and her

daughter came in, Domenico announcing them in his most melancholy voice.

Lady Sandys, like most other people, was thoroughly illogical, and in her enthusiasm for Sappho quite forgot her distrust of "the little wandering American widow," as she had stigmatized her husband's old friend on their way to the pension. She greeted Mrs. Roper with cordiality, introduced her to the glacial marchesa as if she felt they would prove particularly congenial to each other, and then made Sappho sit down close to the tea-table by her.

And Sappho was delighted to do so, for she did not see the cosmetics or the lines of selfishness on the old face that turned so kindly towards her. She saw only the yearning and the tentative affection in the poor old pencilled eyes, and felt very happy in her corner of the great splendid room by her new friend.

Mrs. Roper enjoyed herself too, though she talked little. She was a clever woman in her way, and made no effort, in this environment, to be amusing. She knew that many women had "amused" society into closing its doors to them.

Very demure she looked in her simple grey coat and skirt, and small black hat; very quietly she talked with the marchesa, who took nervous peeps at her through her glasses every now and then, and wondered how so young a woman could have such a big daughter.

Sir Bartle, for his part, was disappointed in the party. He felt an instinctive respect for the old marchesa, but she had an odd, uncomfortable effect on him; he thought she was like some ugly old nun; and that Milly was not nearly so pretty to-day as she had been in the villa.

He did not know that in her wisdom Mrs. Roper had

for the occasion eliminated her little aids to beauty, such as eyebrow pencils and powder, and was hence looking her real age.

Besides, she hardly once glanced at him, and her usually merry, rather wicked violet eyes were to-day empty of sparkle and mischief as she discussed, he *thought*, the new crêche in the via de' Banchi with the marchesa. Milly Roper and a crêche!

Sappho, who was dressed in a ripe chestnut-coloured coat and skirt, and a delightful flesh-tinted crêpe-de-chine blouse, quietly helped Lady Sandys with her tea-making, and answered the old lady's questions as simply as a child would have done.

Yes, she liked Naples. Yes, she knew Italian pretty well, though, of course, not so well as mother. Yes, she had been in England, but—well, she didn't honestly like it quite so well as she liked Italy and France, though she loved Westminster Abbey. And muffins. She loved muffins, too.

Nino Gamba, upstairs in his bedroom, sat on the yellow silk sofa while Carletto, his servant, changed his muddy boots for a neat pair of new patent leather shoes. He was an astonishingly handsome young man of thirty, with the purely Greek face still to be found in Naples, though more commonly among the lower classes than the upper. His dark wavy hair was varnished to a head precisely like that of the Apollo Belvedere, even to the small flat ears, but his nose, being slightly less heavy than that of his marble prototype, was to modern eyes more beautiful.

His immense, tragic, dark eyes, very like his mother's, were balanced by a decidedly merry, almost over-richly

curved mouth that a small black moustache just shaded. He was dressed with good, expensive taste in blue serge, and wore a big baroque pearl in his tie, and on the little finger of his left hand a carved emerald set in pale old gold.

At the moment he was cross, and everything about him showed it. He can almost have been said to pout, as the red-headed Marietta who stood by the door gave him his mother's message. "An apoplexy to the two contessine," he grumbled. "Can't you persuade Mamma to leave me in peace about them Mariuccia?"

"Signor Marchesino, no. There is to be roast lamb for dinner, and asparagus and ices from Dondoni's, and a bottle of the Signor Marchese's burgundy. Dinner is to be at eight, as you like it—since you have been so much in Rome," she added maliciously.

He rose, for his shoes were now tied, and went to the basin where water was ready for his hands. "Contessina Gilda is spotty," he said obstinately; "and Contessina Livia walks like a goose. You *know* she does, Marietta, And the devil catch me if I'll marry either of 'em."

He attacked his nails violently with the stiffest of (English) nail brushes and eau-de-cologne soap (French), and Marietta answered, unmoved, "Good, good. Then the palace and the pictures must be sold and your signora mother will die of a broken heart, and God and Our Lady will curse you, and you'll go to hell."

He did not laugh, for he had not brains enough to think for himself, and accepted every phase of the doctrines so vital to his mother exactly as he accepted the idea of death; as unavoidable but too unpleasant to think about. He had mortgaged the palace seven years before, when he had believed himself to be on the point of being accepted

by the daughter of a millionaire contractor in Rome, but the girl had refused him, and his affairs, long desperate, were now at an acute crisis.

Carletto had gone his way to buy flowers to send from his master to a lady attached to one of the lesser theatres, and Marietta, who had been his nurse, and without whom he could not remember ever having been, seemed to him almost as much a Gamba as he himself.

"The Pandolfi aren't so *very* rich, after all, you know," he declared, rubbing his hands on a towel; "there's a man come over from Catania whose daughter is said to have a dowry of twenty millions!"

"That may be. But *she'll* want a prince or at least a duke, and besides—Donna Maria Pandolfi would accept you for *either* of her daughters, and at once. After all," Marietta concluded, as he brushed his hair at the mirror over his chest of drawers, "it's something to have the choice between *two* young ladies!"

Gamba laughed, showing a great many little shining square teeth as white as a dog's.

"Well, anyhow, I'm being a good child to-day, going to tea with that old alligator of a woman. Ugh! I believe she is a 'jettatrice'!"

He laughed as he spoke, but folded back the two middle fingers of his right hand over the thumb, and pointed the index and little fingers together, thus making the classic "horns" to keep off the evil eye. "Good-bye, Mariuccia," he called, as he went to the door. "I'll come to dinner, of course. Oh—I saw my uncle to-day—Don Ottavio. Don't tell my mother, but he's in trouble again."

Marietta sighed. "Ah, if only the Lord would see fit

to remove Don Ottavio," she answered, in a tone of the most perfect respect.

Gamba ran downstairs singing softly to himself.

When everyone had had a cup of tea, Lady Sandys felt that she must devote herself to the marchesa for a few moments. "You might go and look at the pictures, my dear," she said to Sappho; "the important ones are all labelled——"

Then she turned to the marchesa, and Sappho wandered about, gazing with interest and respect, if without any particular appreciation, at the treasures that might have saved the Gamba fortunes but for the law forbidding the sale of such heirlooms. There was a Perugino and a Tiepolo, a small Andrea del Sarto (which pleased Sappho best of all), and many others by artists whose names she did not know.

She was standing looking at a beautiful little Holy Family by Filippino Lippi, when the door suddenly opened and Domenico appeared.

"Il Signor Marchese Gamba," Domenico said, it seemed to the girl, to her, and Gamba came into the room.

Sappho wanted to move, but could not. Her feet seemed to have grown into the shining floor and she stood quite still, staring at the young man, for she had never in her life seen anyone quite so beautiful. And he stared back, for something about her, something, he said to himself "different" struck him at once. Their eyes met, and Sappho blushed and walked vaguely towards the nearest window.

Then the young man went on to the group by the fire-

place, and she heard him greeting their hostess and their host, and being introduced to her mother.

She stood half behind the heavy green and silver brocaded curtains, looking out into the rainy dusk. The street was a narrow mediaeval one, and in the courtyard of the palace opposite a groom in a striped waistcoat was washing a carriage with a large wet sponge, and whistling Musetta's waltz-song out of "La Bohème."

In the pool of light from the window she could see the needlelike rain piercing the mud. . . .

She did not want to go back to the others; she did not want to see even the kind old lady with the lovely pink cheeks. She would have liked to creep out of the palace and walk for a long time in the rain.

Then Sir Bartle trotted up the room to her and led her back. "Your mamma wants to go home, my dear," he said, patting her arm as they walked, "but you must come again soon."

He had been horribly bored for the last hour and felt angry with Milly for being so dull, but the child was a nice child, he thought, though nothing like so attractive as her mother,——

Nino Gamba made her a beautiful bow when he was introduced to her, and said that he had seen her one night at the opera with an old lady.

"Oh! Yes, that was Mrs. Caldwell. She lives at our pension," she answered, a little flurried. And that was all.

Her mother and she took their leave, old Sir Bartle accompanying them to the door of the drawing-room and rather foolishly, she thought, reproaching her mother for not talking to him. "You found a lot to say to that terrible old marchesa, Milly," he said, in a funny, woeful

voice. And her mother laughingly said: "The marchesa is delightful, Sir Bartle—and—I don't think you used to call me 'Milly,' did you?"

They walked home—for the rain had suddenly ceased, and everything smelt of growth and flowers. There was a pinkish-gold streak in the western sky, and a bird was singing in the garden as they ended their long climb.

"Really a *charming* woman, though a little stiff at first," her mother said, pausing for breath, as they reached the level ground, "and *wasn't* her son handsome?"

Sappho did not answer.

CHAPTER IV.

SAPPHO ROPER was all her life to associate warm spring rain with a girl's first love. Day after day that March the soft air was silvered with rain; the olives, always, after willows, the most aqueous looking of trees, seemed to be dripping their very lives away as their delicate silver and green leaves drooped under the tender showers; the flowers wept, but were not broken as flowers are by March wet in the north, and when the sun came out, as every now and then he did, the whole world glittered as if created by God anew for lovers.

Old Lady Sandys took the young girl for a drive nearly every afternoon, running what Italians consider an almost suicidal risk of catching cold, for the carriage was open and the two ladies protected only by raincoats and umbrellas.

Afterwards, Sappho could remember the lovely whispering rain, but she could not remember getting wet.

Once they drove to Portici and had tea with a delightful old Irishwoman who modelled animals in clay, and whose large, loose mask of flesh seemed to be nailed to her skull by four big moles. They drank tea on a little cement terrace in her garden, surrounded by dogs who were too fat to be hungry but who were amusingly greedy, and the lady gave Sappho a tiny figure of a donkey trying to bite a fly off his hip bone.

Another day they went to Posilippo and lunched with a young honeymoon couple who had rented a most wonder-

ful villa with a garden beautiful beyond one's dreams. There was a swimming pool built in the rocks at the foot of the garden, and Mrs. Ramsay said that she and Reggie went for a swim every morning before breakfast.

When Mr. Ramsay told his wife to describe their bathing suits to Lady Sandys, the bride, who was six foot tall and freckled, but somehow, Sappho thought, very beautiful and fascinating, threw a piece of bread at him and *said* that she was trying to blush, though Sappho did not see either why she should blush, or that she did.

On other days the two friends drove in the Villa at the fashionable hour, and saw all the Neapolitan ladies and gentlemen bowing and smiling at each other.

And everywhere they went, sooner or later they were sure to meet Nino Gamba. Sappho always saw him first, but she never told Lady Sandys that he was coming and for a very long time—possibly a whole fortnight—she regarded these meetings as a mysterious piece of benevolence on the part of the gods; but one afternoon as she left the palazzo after tea he joined her and confessed that he had bribed Lady Sandys's coachman to tell him what his orders for the day were.

"You see, the roads are up a good deal in the spring," he said, "and you know how she hates rough travelling and turning back, so she asks Vincenzo every morning where they had better go, and he tells me."

Sappho did not answer. She stood there in her simple little butter-coloured frock, her face—to him so wonderful a face in its sincerity and dignity of expression—a little smile stirring her lips, her soft brown eyes full of evening light.

"Sappho," he said in an undertone.

He knew that he really loved her and that she really loved him, but what could he do?

"I—I am so miserable," he said, forgetting to speak English.

Then she really smiled. "I am happy," she answered, "and—so are you too, *really*, I think."

Thus she left him, and he went for a long walk, brooding angrily and planlessly on his poverty.

It was the next day, which happened to be her twentieth birthday, that her mother gave her the little bust of the Apollo Belvedere.

"May I really choose?" she asked, as they walked down through the olive trees under dripping umbrellas.

"Whatever you like, darling, up to ten dollars."

Mrs. Roper made no comment when Sappho told her that she wanted a little bust after the antique, but her face stiffened for a moment as she asked in the voice that she used only to her daughter: "Which bust, my heart?"

Sappho laughed. "You know what a goose I am about remembering—it's one of the Vatican ones—I saw a copy of the head—miniature, about eight inches high—in Anselmi's window the other day."

They went to Anselmi's shop in the Chiaja, and Sappho at once found what she wanted and handed it to her mother with a look of trust that was almost dog-like. "This is the one," she said.

And Milly Roper knew all about it at once. Her love for her daughter was too deep for her not to have known long ago that something had happened to her, but now she was sure, and her own heart seemed to stand still.

She bought the bust, though it cost more than she had

decided they could afford, and they went out and walked along the sea wall.

The sun had come out while they were in the shop, and it was suddenly very warm, so that they used their umbrellas as parasols and walked slowly on in a little moving patch of inky shadow.

"I love my present, mother," the girl said, slipping it out of her bag and looking at it.

"Yes."

"It is a beautiful face, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear. Beautiful."

"Mrs. Roper's voice was a little rough, as if she had caught cold. She was facing the greatest disaster that could possibly have come to her, and she was afraid to speak.

But Sappho, for all her aloofness and shyness, was not shy or aloof with her mother. She loved her mother with a concentration unknown to young girls whose lives are different. She had no father, no brothers and sisters, no aunts, nor cousins whom she knew, and during her short life she had never stayed long enough in one place to make any real friends, for she was of those in whom friendship is a plant of slow, shy growth, and she had no one but her mother.

She realized her mother's passionate devotion to her and returned it in full, and added to her devotion was a boundless respect and admiration.

Her mother's incontestable beauty was to her no more patent than her mother's unselfishness, wisdom and nobility, and indeed, in so far as her child was concerned, Milly Roper had always been, and was, unselfish, wise, and noble.

So now Sappho knew neither shyness nor fear. Setting the little bust of Parian marble on the sea wall she said simply: "Isn't it exactly like the marchese, mother?"

"Oh, Sappho, my darling, my sweet," faltered the little woman, looking up at her, "you know, don't you, how poor he is?"

"Yes, I know. Just look at that line there! Isn't it *exactly* like him?"

"Sappho—don't you think we had better go away from Naples?" her mother asked, laying her hand on the girl's, as it caressed the bust. There was much to be read in the two hands. Mrs. Roper's was small, and a little sunburnt, and thin. A nervous, capable hand, with rather long fingers, and beautifully kept square nails.

Sappho's was larger and softer, with better nails but shorter fingers, and a little too plump across the knuckles. A far less capable hand than her mother's.

"Go away from Naples?" The girl drew back and looked down into her mother's troubled, loving eyes. "Why?"

There was a short pause, and then, wisely, Mrs. Roper told her why. "Because there is no use in your getting to care for Nino Gamba. He is too poor to be able to marry you."

"Going away wouldn't do any good, darling, I—I love him already, and he loves me," the girl answered dreamily. "I am very happy."

They walked back towards the Chiaja in almost unbroken silence, but hand in hand, when the skies suddenly opened and a pelting, drenching rain came down. They got into a little public victoria and were driven home, crouching together behind the high-hooked rubber

apron, their arms round each other, their cheeks together and wet with their own and each other's tears. Sappho was very happy.

A few mornings later Don Ottavio Gamba left his lodgings in the via Carlo Sette with instructions to his landlady to let no one in during his absence. "I am going to the palazzo to see my sister-in-law," he added, "and shall be back in two hours' time."

"Very well, excellenza," the woman said, smiling at him. She had been very handsome and was still what Italians call a fine piece of a woman, but Don Ottavio, who had once loved her for a few weeks, now hated her, for she knew more of his affairs than was good for him. He could not rebuke or scold her, for Fede Granchi was a very intelligent woman indeed, and never referred in words to what she knew. She was silent, and respectful enough in her manner, but she allowed herself one indulgence, and this indulgence drove the old man nearly mad. She smiled. . . . She could smile a thousand different ways, and each smile was like a finger post pointing to some special bit of secret knowledge about his affairs.

That morning, as she stood leaning against the wall in the passage, her smile meant that she knew he was going to the house of his father to humiliate himself by asking money from his sister-in-law, whom he hated because she despised him.

"I dreamed of waves, Don Ottavio—that's 17—and of poultry—black poultry—80. I tell you, as you asked me to dream for you."

His face changed and he took a shabby little note-book

from his pocket and made a minute and careful note of the numbers. "Thank you, Fede," he said, "I'll play them. After all, your dreams *have* brought me luck."

He walked up to the nearest cab rank, jumped into a cab, and was driven to the Palazzo Gamba.

He was a small, gnarled old man, with a fiercely waxed moustache and a beaky nose. He looked hot-headed, intolerant, obstinate, unscrupulous, weak and humorous, and he was all of these entirely blendable things. He wore a long, belted coat with an astrachan collar and a squirrel lining, for he was always chilly, and his gloves were very new.

As he passed, on his way upstairs, Lady Sandys's drawing-room, the sound of two voices reached him, and he paused for a minute, grinning unpleasantly, before he went on. An ancient, paralytic-looking butler opened his sister-in-law's door to him, and he went into the drawing-room, where a feeble fire gasped, muling and puking in its infancy, in an iron basket in the big fireplace.

There were no pictures on the dingy, snuff-coloured walls, and no books anywhere in sight. There were many stiff-backed chairs, a pair of spindle-legged twin sofas, several vast looking-glasses, which naturally added to the ghastliness of the apartment, and a shallow piano. There was also a magnificent old Venetian glass chandelier shrouded in yellow gauze.

Don Ottavio sat down by the fire and blew on his fingers to keep them warm. A clock struck eleven, and the door opened and Donna Laura came in."

"Good morning, Ottavio," she said, in her even, cold voice, giving him her hand which he respectfully kissed. "What do you want?"

"My dear Laura," he answered with extreme politeness, "I need a little money."

"You know that I have very little money—how much do you need?" She spoke in a voice of impatience, her eyes half shut.

"A trifle. A thousand lire."

"I cannot give you that much," she answered, "and I know that you do not expect that much. I will give you four hundred lire."

There was a pause. Formerly he had stormed and threatened, or even wept, on such occasions, but he had learnt that storms and threats and tears were utterly useless with his sister-in-law. He knew, too, that when she said she *could* give him only four hundred, she spoke the truth.

"Very well," he said sulkily. "You must not forget that I have a note of every penny you have ever lent me, and that some day I shall repay you."

"De grâce, Ottavio," she said wearily, rising and going towards the door, "spare me that. You are my husband's brother, and I believe it to be my duty to help you as much as I can, though I will not injure my son for your sake, and I know quite well that you will never repay me."

When she came back with four bank-notes in her hand she waited patiently while he filled in the blanks of a formal receipt he had prepared and signed it.

She folded the useless paper and laid it on the table by which she stood.

She was waiting for him to go, but he did not go. Instead, he smiled suddenly and asked her how Nino was.

"He is well, thank you."

"I hear he's going to marry one of Maria Pandolfi's

girls—the pigeon-toed one, Gennaro Bentivoglio told me—”

“I should like to have my son marry,” she answered coldly.

“Già! But who’s the very pretty girl I saw him talking to outside a shop the other day? She was in a carriage with an old woman.”

“Probably an American girl whom we met at tea at Lady Sandys’s.”

Don Ottavio pricked up his ears. “American! Rich, of course! I hope she’ll accept him. We need money.”

“He has no intention of asking Signorina Roper to marry him,” Donna Laura returned proudly, “but if he did, is it likely any American would refuse to marry my son?”

“H’m! You never can tell, my dear Laura,” the old man answered, buttoning his overcoat and pulling on his gloves, “an American heiress in Rome once refused *me*.”

He looked like a dilapidated, shameless old monkey, but Donna Laura did not smile. He was a wastrel and a disgrace to the house, but he was still a Gamba, and no Gamba could ever appear laughable to her.

“I am busy to-day, Ottavio,” she said, after a pause, “I must go to the crèche, and then to see some of my poor people—”

“Very well, Laura, I understand. Holy Mother of God, you poor thing, how you loathe me!” There was a curious absence of bitterness in his voice, and as she tried to speak he silenced her with a gesture. “You’ll not believe me,” he went on, “but—I am sorry for you, Laura. We Gamba men have given you a great deal of pain, first

and last, haven't we? First Guido and then me, and then——”

“Hush” she said sternly, “I have forgiven Guido. I never think of him now.”

He kissed her hand again, and with a singularly graceful bow left her alone.

She stood quite still for several seconds and then, going slowly to her bedroom, washed her hands very carefully.

CHAPTER V

CHARLES BRUCE reached Naples, after a breakdown of his train just beyond Rome, at seven o'clock on the third of April.

He drove to an hotel, had a bath, dressed, and made his way on foot to his uncle's apartment.

It was a splendid night, the sky palpitating with stars, the air thick with scent from the vast old gardens that are so beautifully secluded behind their high walls, and every now and then the throbbing of a guitar broke the quiet of the narrow streets through which Bruce walked.

He was a tall man with a magnificent figure and a strong, ugly, underhung face that wrinkled a good deal when he laughed. Being very short-sighted and quite without vanity, he wore large-glassed spectacles that he never took off except at night, thus making himself, as Lady Sandys said, even uglier than he need have been.

In spite of these things his was a pleasant face, and when he believed himself unobserved the lines left it by mental pain well-endured were pleasing to see, though as a rule a certain whimsical reserve of his hid them like a mask.

He found his aunt surrounded by a small group of friends, and his uncle playing bridge with two other men and a very pretty woman in black. The pretty woman was Mrs. Roper, and a rubber being just over, Charles was at once introduced to her as well as to the other members of the party.

Lady Sandys had an excellent cook, and Sir Bartle knew a great deal about wines, and enjoyed spending his money in hospitality, so, other things being equal, he and his wife had already made a good many acquaintances, and had guests to dinner nearly every evening.

But on this occasion most of the guests left early to go on to a Caruso night at the San Felice, and by half-past nine only seven people were left in the great room; Sir Bartle and Lady Sandys themselves, Mrs. and Miss Roper, Marchese Gamba, a charming old priest, a great favourite of Lady Sandys, Don Ippolito della Mauresca, and Bruce himself.

The night had grown very warm, and Don Ippolito, sniffing delicately with his handsome old nose, declared that he smelt thunder.

"Thunder, sir? I never in my life saw so many stars as I saw on my way here to-night," Bruce answered.

Don Ippolito smiled. "Ah, signore, you are young! I remember that when I was young the stars were more than they are now. They get fewer and fewer as one grows older," he added, turning to Sir Bartle, "don't you think so?"

But this, of course, was beyond Sir Bartle, who, looking rather embarrassed, replied that he had never noticed the stars much.

Mrs. Roper, very quiet as usual when Lady Sandys was present, flashed a quick, demure look at him, and said thoughtfully: "I remember once, years ago, when I was young, a young man wrote some verses about me and the stars. The idea of the poem was that my eyes had once been stars,——"

She said it so drolly that even Lady Sandys laughed, and no one but Bruce noticed his uncle's confusion.

Nino Gamba and Sappho were seated at the piano which Lady Sandys had hired for the young girl, and presently Lady Sandys asked him to sing. "He's a noodle, you know, Charles," she explained, as a song was being chosen and Sappho glanced over the accompaniment, "but his voice is lovely."

"Why is he a noodle?" inquired the old priest, who was a Roman, in Naples only on a visit.

Lady Sandys laughed. "I didn't mean it unkindly at all, Don Ippolito," she said earnestly, "he is a charming young man and I like him, but—really he is remarkably empty-headed."

Charles Bruce looked across at the two young people by the piano. "It may be empty, Aunt Violet," he said, "but it's a wonderfully beautiful head. I shall ask him to sit to me"

"Monsieur est jeintre?" asked the polyglot old Roman.

"More or less—chiefly less, I fear——"

"My nephew paints very well indeed," corrected Lady Sandys. "Hush, he's going to sing."

Nino Gamba's voice was one of the almost distressingly sweet high baritones that one hears in southern Italy, rather less often in society than amongst the very lowest class. He had had but little training, and sang with too much expression to please a rigidly critical ear, but it was a voice no one even ever tried to resist.

Lady Sandys wept unrestrainedly, forgetting her lower lashes, which smeared her cheeks as she rubbed her eyes with her fingers—having as usual mislaid her handkerchief.

Don Ippolito lay back in his chair, his almost bald head and ivory-coloured face in picturesque relief against the dark damask. Bruce, who had never asked an indiscreet question in his life, was intensely interested in people's thoughts, and being oddly impervious to the charm of music, amused himself during Gamba's singing with studying the various faces round him. What, he wondered, was that beautiful old priest dreaming about? And his uncle? And poor old painted Aunt Violet? Then he watched Mrs. Roper. Ah, it was plain enough to guess what she was thinking of!

"She's devoted to that daughter of hers," he mused, "and she sees the girl is in love with the romantic-looking noodle. And she, the mother, is torn between hopes that he will marry her, and fear that he won't; and if he does marry her and doesn't make her happy, then God help him, for that little woman would shoot him without turning a hair."

Nino himself was carried away by his own song, and his emotions were almost embarrassingly visible, as he stood, his head thrown back, his hands clasped before him.

Bruce looked again at his aunt, who was watching the singer. Not a sign in Lady Sandys' face to suggest that she too had noticed the passion the young man was positively brandishing before her.

"How can she be so blind?" Bruce asked himself. And then he understood. He realized why she had sent for him, and why she did not see that Sappho loved the young Italian. "She meant her for me," he thought, "and she is blinded by her own plan. Poor old soul!"

The garden of the Palazzo Gamba had been sold a hundred and fifty years before, and built upon, but from

the drawing-room windows stretched a small roof-garden that Lady Sandys had had filled with growing azaleas and roses in pots.

Hither, after the song, the two young people went, and sat down in big straw chairs among the flowers. They were in plain view from the drawing-room, and what they said could be heard, yet somehow two of the people in the room felt in some way that the hour was for those two a momentous one.

Milly Roper had turned very white, and on meeting Bruce's eyes she hesitated for a moment and then signalled to him that she needed help.

"Looks rather pleasant out there, Aunt Vi," he remarked, "may I go and have a look at it?"

"Of course, my dear. Take my scarf to Sappho. She mustn't catch cold."

He laughed. "Don't you want to come and feel her pulse, Mrs. Roper?"

"Thanks," she said, as they reached the window, "that was good of you."

". . . so I don't mind anything," they heard Sappho say, and before he noticed their approach Gamba had answered passionately: "But I tell you I can't stand it."

"But what can we *do*?" Sappho asked in her gentle voice.

The Italian did not answer, but his gesture was eloquent.

Bruce did not speak Italian, but the young man's meaning was unmistakable, and Bruce at once walked to the end of the terrace and sat down out of earshot, his broad back turned to the others.

"May I stay here with you?" It was Sappho who had

joined him. "I—I don't want to go back to the drawing-room just yet."

He gave her his chair, sitting down on the low stone balustrade, and after a glance at her turned his eyes to the restlessly stirring tree tops in the neighbouring garden. He had seen that she was extremely pale, and he knew that her absolute immobility meant great tension. They sat on in silence.

He wished it were possible for any human being to make another look at a third through his or her eyes. If only he could make this young, suffering thing see, as he saw him, the handsome, spoilt, empty-headed boy she so plainly believed to be a demi-god.

But he knew that only time could open her eyes, and that when it did open them her heart might break. It was odd, he afterwards thought, that none of the consolations lookers-on usually offer themselves on such occasions occurred to him. He did not tell himself that she was too young to suffer deeply. He had no thoughts about calf-love, or episodes, or the inevitable effect of the Italian spring on young girls.

Instinctively, without reasoning, he accepted Sappho Roper's love for Nino Gamba as a real love, and he knew that two-thirds of any real love is pain.

At last Mrs. Roper rejoined them. "Come, my darling," she said gently, "we'll go home now."

The girl rose and looked vaguely about her. "Yes, mother." Then she held out her hand to Bruce. "Thank you," she said, the first words she had spoken. "I'm—I'm afraid I didn't hear your name."

He lingered awhile on the terrace, listening to the coming of the storm, then went in to where his uncle and

aunt were yawning at each other and discussing the advisability of taking a villa at Posilippo for the summer.

"Well," Lady Sandys exclaimed at last, when Bruce had given her all the home news he could think of and described his journey, "what do you think of the Ropers?"

"Mrs. Roper is charming," he answered with solemnity, "a very pretty woman. I'm going to ask her to sit to me. I shall call the picture 'The Pelican'."

"Good heavens, Charles!"

Sir Bartle laughed. "Now what d'ye mean by *that*?" he asked.

Bruce looked owlishly at him through his large tortoise-shell spectacles. "Oh, nothing in particular. I think she's a good mother, that's all."

"So she is, so she is, to do her justice," Lady Sandys agreed, with the fervour of a woman speaking favourably of a woman she dislikes.

"Such a dreadful thing to say about anyone," Bruce said, "to do her justice.' Where is the 'but,' Aunt Vi? The fish-hook in the oats?"

"There isn't any fish-hook. I don't care much for Americans, you know, and—oh, well, these stray little women without roots—you know what I mean. But isn't Sappho lovely? And," the old lady ended, sipping her sherry and hot water, which deadly drink was her Italian equivalent for her usual modest nightcap, "She's such a *good girl*."

Bruce, who loved teasing, nodded absently. "I shall paint her—if she'll let me—under a green-lined umbrella in a blaze of sun."

"Oh, bother Mrs. Roper," his aunt snapped. "Why don't you paint Sappho?"

"Good girls aren't so paintable as their pretty mammas. What do *you* think, Uncle Bartle?"

"I think," Sir Bartle unexpectedly replied, "that Gamba is in love with her!"

Lady Sandys started. "Gamba! In love with Mrs. Roper? Why she's old enough——"

"To be his mother. That's what women always say about each other," Sir Bartle returned, "and it's absurd. Milly's just over forty, and Gamba's thirty—he told me so himself. But anyhow, as it happens, I didn't mean her at all. It's *Sappho* he's in love with, and she with him, too."

Poor Lady Sandys' face fell in a way so abjectly pathetic that Bruce was sorry for her.

"*Sappho*, Bartle? But—she can't be. She—she's such a *sensible girl*."

Sir Bartle chuckled. "Exactly. Well, I'm going to bed now, Violet. Too tired to talk any more, but you mark my words, *I'm right*."

The old man trotted off, and Lady Sandys in her disappointment blew up her nephew. "If you had come when I wrote," she wailed, "it wouldn't have happened. Exactly like you, Charles, to spoil everything by your dawdling ways."

He rarely troubled to feign ignorance about anything, and he did not do so now. "My coming a week earlier wouldn't have changed matters, dear Aunt Vi," he said gently, "even if—if I were the kind of man who marries—which you know I'm not."

"Oh, rubbish! *Every man is a marrying man!* And it's about time you got over this silly affectation of being

heart broken. It's eight years since Claire Villiers married her Swede."

Bruce rose. "We will not talk about Claire, please," he said, "but if she had never been born, Miss Roper would never have looked at me. Uncle Bartle is right. She and Gamba love each other."

Lady Sandys flushed, the ugly, disfiguring red that expresses anger in old people. "It's that horrid, vulgar little mother," she said spitefully. "Of course she'd like to be mother-in-law to a marquis. That donkey!"

"You are wrong about the mother, though, I *think*. I don't believe she was, at any rate, *quite* sure till this evening, and she looked very much distressed."

"He can't possibly marry her," Lady Sandys began, more hopefully, after a pause, "he hasn't a penny, and she, of course, hasn't—she'll get over it, too. Girls always do."

Bruce did not answer for a moment, and then he said slowly: "I *think* you are mistaken, Aunt Violet. It struck me that she—that it's not just the usual 'first love' business. And she's a girl who will suffer."

But Lady Sandys had no belief in the durability and depth of the loves of the very young. "She'll have forgotten all about him in six months," she snapped. "We mustn't let her be unhappy, Charles," she said, as he kissed her good night, "I really love her, and if she pines about it, your uncle and I will just take her away somewhere—to Paris, say,—and cheer her up."

Bruce walked home to his hotel in a driving rain, his thoughts busy with the Ropers.

He was sorry for the mother, but far sorrier for the girl, for he himself was of the Troublesomely faithful kind,

and had, as Sir Bartle had told Mrs. Roper, suffered for years over an unhappy love affair. Indeed, he still suffered over it at times, and the events of the evening had rather disastrously freshened his memory of it. He wondered how Claire was now, and if she was happy.

CHAPTER VI

"THEN my godfather, Prince Azzaioli of Perugia, will eventually leave me something, and I *think* I could get permission to sell the family pictures—although the Government's very tiresome about such things——"

Nino Gamba sat on the arm of a red plush armchair, a cigarette in his hand, a rose in his coat.

Opposite him, Charles Bruce leaned against the mantelpiece, his hands in the pockets of a very shabby Norfolk jacket, and smoked a pipe.

It had suddenly turned cold, the windows were streaked with rain, and a small fire of pine cones and olive wood spluttered on the stone hearth, sending out delightful puffs of scent that Bruce loved because they reminded him of ancient Greece.

Bruce watched the younger man with mixed feelings, his artistic eyes filled with pleasure in the beauty of the dark face, his mind as full of a kind of indulgent indignation.

"Yes; but—when is your godfather going to die?" he asked.

Gamba stared. "Eh? Ah, I see!" He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "You mustn't make a mock of me, Signor Bruce. I saw last night that you were understanding, and that is why I come to ask you to advise me."

"But you don't *want* advice. What you want, and what I have really not got to give you," Bruce answered pleasantly, dispassionately, "*is sympathy.*"

"You don't sympathize with us?"

Bruce hesitated for a moment, and he sat down astride a chair and leaned his elbows on its back. "Look here, marchese," he said slowly, "I'll tell you in two words what I think. If you and Miss Roper love each other—as I, of course, believe—there's only one thing to be done. Get some work and do it."

Gamba nodded, his face sparkling as only such dark southern faces can sparkle, with mischief. "Ah, yes, work. Ebbene, I am ready, I will work! I can speak bad English and Italian-French (the worst in the world), I can ride, I can fence, I can sing—a little. I can dance, well. I can read, and write so that some people can read what I've written, and some can't. I can swim, and I'm not bad as an amateur actor." He paused, and then added gravely, "Oh, yes, one thing more, I can poach eggs better than anyone alive. Now which of those gifts would you suggest my utilizing as a means of making my living?"

He was so handsome, so young, so full of vitality, that Bruce could not resist him. "You are a wretch," he said, feeling twenty years, instead of six or seven years, older than the Italian, "and I admit you are not very well equipped for the struggle. The question is, then, as you can't support a wife how can you spare Miss Roper the most pain?"

Gamba's face changed. "Do not make the mistake of doubting my love for her."

"I do not doubt it," Bruce answered, watching his face as it slowly turned to a peculiarly intense shade of old ivory.

"Thank you," Gamba rose. "What I wanted to ask

you, if I could make up my mind to," he went on earnestly, "is this. I have a cousin in Argentina. He has a ranch—and—I *could* be of use to him with his horses. If Sappho will go out with me, and I could get enough money to take her out in comfort, and to secure us a bare living there, say, for a year—by that time I should have learnt enough to get a decent salary from Carlo Paldi, my cousin."

Bruce reflected. "It's a pretty rough life," he said finally, "and very lonely. Is your cousin married?"

"No, that's just the trouble. He—he isn't much of a man, but he loves horses and cattle. Of course, she'd be very much alone——"

Bruce thought that he knew that Sappho would go, and that she would not mind the loneliness. He believed that she would be able to endure material hardships with perfect composure, so long as her inner life was safe. But, as he studied the young man's face, he wondered how stable *he* might be. He liked Gamba for his boyishness, and his queer frankness that was yet not exactly unreserve, but he saw in him certain signs of capriciousness.

"Do you think *you* could stand it?" he asked bluntly.

Gamba did not answer at once. His eyes half closed, were fixed on one of the wet windows, "I am spoilt, you mean," he answered, a little expression of sadness crossing his face. "Yes, you're right. My mother—you see, I'm her only child, and—she has not had a very happy life—that's another thing. It will—she'll miss me horribly—oh, my God!" he burst out angrily, jumping up and throwing a newly lighted cigarette into the fire. "Why are things so tangled?"

Then he laughed and held out his hand to Bruce.

"Excuse me for being so silly, will you?" he asked, looking really rueful. "I'll go now, and not bother you any more."

"You haven't bothered me. I only wish I could be of some use. To be quite frank, I can see Miss Roper being happy on a lonely ranch, but I can't see *you*! Surely you could get some kind of work in Italy?"

"Don Giovanni Gamba, riding master, or, Marchese Gamba, Instructor in bad French and English—" He laughed. "There is just one hope of my raising money. I have an uncle, who is the *brebis galeuse*—the black sheep—of the family. He gambles in the lottery—the National Lottery, you know—and plays all games of chance—altogether a scoundrelly old fellow. But he is fond of me, and—he once bought of my father a diamond and ruby ring that my father's godfather had given *him*—do you see? It wasn't an heirloom, so my father sold it to him once when he—papa—was hard up. Zio Ottavio, so far as I know, has never sold the thing, though he's as poor as a rat. He always said he was going to leave it to me. If he has still got it, and I could persuade him to let me sell it, then—well, by God, if she'd go, I'd try it. We are young, and a few years of loneliness ought not to hurt us—"

"'Ought not,' no. But—however," Bruce smiled at him, and the two men, so unlike, were rather near friendship at that moment. "I wish you every happiness."

When Gamba had left him to go back to talk to his mother, Bruce opened the back of his watch and looked for some minutes at the little old faded photograph in it. "I wonder," he said.

Nino Gamba bowed over the hand of a beautiful woman whose *victoria* had stopped for a moment in the slow procession of carriages and paid her an outrageous compliment with the most irresistible of airs, after which, walking on, he bowed with extreme arrogance to a rich and socially very successful Jew, who longed to be seen talking to him. Then, reaching the narrow, chill street in which he lived, he marched to the palace as if the world were his, and he had just given orders for its instant destruction.

Three minutes later he had entered his mother's cold, shabby drawing-room and turned into a little boy. *Mammina* he called the stern, grim woman—little mother; *carina*—little dear; my treasure. And as he sat at her feet on a hideous Berlin woolwork stool, her strong hands in his, his curly head leaning against her inhuman-looking knees, the beautiful woman to whom he had paid the outrageous compliment, the Jew who received his arrogant bow, even poor old Sir Bartle Sandys, whom he had passed on the threshold of the palace, and whom he really liked, would hardly have known him.

All the beauty of his remarkably beautiful, banal face was so gentle and coloured with love for his mother that he would have been almost unrecognizable to anyone but her.

“*Mammina, I suffer,*” he moaned, like a wounded dove.

“*My son—it will pass—*” The marchesa spoke gently, her granitic face also amazingly softened.

“*Yes, but in the meantime,*” he returned, “*I am ravaged, lacerated.*”

It was true. He had grown thin during the week that had passed since his talk on the terrace with Mrs. Roper,

and his dark, lambent eyes were hollow. "She does not leave the house—that pension of ill-omen—and I cannot see her——"

The marchesa stroked his hair. "My son, it is hopeless. Therefore, why think about it?"

Nino sat upright, unconsciously expressing the keynote of his life. "I do not think," he cried, striking his breast, "I feel."

On the wall behind the table on which Don Ottavio had filled in his useless receipt for the money the marchesa had lent him, hung a large crucifix of ebony and ivory. To the face of the Man of Sorrows she raised her unhappy eyes, and for a moment she prayed in silence. Then she asked almost timidly, "Have you seen your Uncle Ottavio?"

"This morning. He got back last night, and I went there immediately after breakfast. The ring is—sold, mamma. He sold it three years ago——"

Donna Laura Gamba did not like Sappho Roper; her mother she detested for various, and to her, sensible and excellent reasons; but her dislike of the girl was far more deeply rooted. The man who loathed Dr. Fell could not tell why he loathed him; he had no real reason, but just because he had no real reason his loathing was durable. Donna Laura disliked Mrs. Roper because she believed Mrs. Roper to be irreligious, frivolous, conscienceless. If suddenly Mrs. Roper had proved herself to be devout, serious and conscientious, Donna Laura would not only have liked her, she would in her manner have taken the little woman to her heart and loved her.

On the other hand, though Sappho seemed to Donna Laura to be what she really was, pure, truthful and con-

scientious, Donna Laura disliked her, and this dislike was not based exclusively on Nino's love for the girl. Donna Laura being not only a mother but a Latin mother, of course wished her son to marry money, yet had he fallen in love with one of half a dozen poor Italian, or even poor foreign girls, Donna Laura, though disappointed, would have worked her hands to the bone for them. It was just that she disliked Sappho. Everything about the girl, even her quiet beauty, her voice, the way her eyebrows grew, annoyed the old woman. It was not hatred, or jealousy, or injustice to the girl's many good qualities. It was that most ineradicable of all feelings, an instinctive, reasonless dislike.

So she listened quietly to the young man's raptures and laments, and said very little in return as they sat in the chilly, desolate drawing-room.

Even when he broached his plan of taking Sappho to Argentina and working, she said nothing, though she knew with the dreadful understanding of mothers that work was not in him. She saw fully that he would never work, but to her it seemed right and dignified that it should be so.

Very silently she sat and listened. Listened not only to his words, but to the undercurrent of his thoughts, and at last, when she saw that the thing lay deeper even than she had feared, she spoke.

"I will go and see her, Nino mio," she said slowly in her cold voice. "I will go this afternoon. I will see the girl and her mother."

Nino, who had been crying, mopped his eyes with his beautiful handkerchief and smiled at her. "Ah, then," he said, "it will be all right."

For he had the belief of a small child in his mother's powers. It did not occur to him to ask her how it would be all right; he just knew that it would. He kissed her hard hands, then he kissed her hard cheek. Then he went to his room and washed his own face, soft and downy as a peach. His heart was light, and he sang to himself in an undertone as he brushed his hair. God was in His Heaven, for his mother had promised him that all would be well.

He was selfish, sensual, a spendthrift, but no mother could have resisted him, for his trust in his own mother was a beautiful and touching thing. Without a glance at the glass—for like many very handsome men he had no vanity, he went out. As he passed Lady Sandys's door he came on Domenico and Jeanne, who were plainly quarrelling. The girl was crying, and the man's face looked white and drawn. They stopped speaking as Gamba approached, and drew back, so that he could pretend not to see them; but he went his way wondering why the valet was unkind to the poor little French girl.

High up in the hills above Naples he owned a small villa, and hither he betook himself, as he always did if he wished to be alone.

There was trouble at the *podere*, for one of the five cream-coloured, square-breasted oxen, as Carducci has it in his incomparably sonorous verse, had died, and the vines were threatened with a dire disease.

All the afternoon Gamba sat in the cool, thick-walled study interviewing one peasant after another; sunburnt men, courtly as only men of ancient civilization can be; yet outspoken and unservile as English peasants never are.

He ordered the purchase of a new ox. He told his

fatiore to burn two fever-haunted cottages; he sent for a doctor from the nearest big town to see to the eyes of a child, threatened with ophthalmia; he was friendly, kind, without *morgue*; he remembered the name of every man and woman in the village, and those of most of the children. In many ways, it will be seen, he was a good fellow, and his peasants loved him, which after all is much, and must be counted to him for righteousness.

Later, at about four, he walked to a little hill overlooking the villa and lay down under a huge umbrella pine, looking down towards Naples, which for all its dirt and smells and vice he loved, as indeed Naples is loved by most of its sons. It is the Falstaff of towns, and he who belongs to it and loves it, leaves it, must often paraphrase what Prince Hal said of the fat knight, "I could have better spared a better town". . .

CHAPTER VII

IN reading this chapter it must be remembered that Donna Laura Gamba was an Italian—which is to say, a member of one of the most practical races in the world. Her views about marriage and her views about love were utterly without the sentimentality in which we Anglo-Saxons drape these matters. Also, it must not be forgotten that she adored her son. It is easy to write or pronounce the word adore, but it is hard to express exactly what is meant by such a feeling in an old-fashioned Italian woman. Donna Laura had had a husband and loved him, and her love had been done to death by his constant unfaithfulness; she had had a daughter, a little beaky-nosed thing, who had lived only three months; to her the honour of the family into which she had married was a kind of oriflamme, a thing to die for, and Don Ottavio Gamba had dragged it in the vilest mud, hence there remained to the passionate, coldly fierce old woman only her son, and to die for him would have been a trifle to her. He, for his part, also loved her, with the articulate, even eloquent, devotion so rarely seen in England.

She had spoiled him from the day of his birth, but, seeing no faults in him, she did not know it, and he had unconsciously assimilated her opinion of him. To her—and even to him—he was a very parfit gentle knight; a chivalrous, noble-minded young man of a romantic temperament; a trustworthy, intelligent, high-principled gentleman.

And it must be said that many of these qualities were his.

He was not a liar, he kept his promises, he was of a kind and gentle nature.

That he believed himself to be intelligent whereas, as a matter of fact, he was rather a stupid man is neither a national nor an unusual mistake. . . .

When he had left her that afternoon Donna Laura sat for awhile deep in thought, and then, after a short visit to the chapel, dressed for a call. She put on her best mantle, a garment of heavy silk but of obsolete form, and her newest hat. Poor lady, this hat sat uneasily on top of her head, and when she moved her head the hat moved too. She was one of those women whose hats never looked settled, but always have a momentarily perched air.

She walked quickly through the hot streets and up the long dusty road to the pension, her black clothes growing more grey every moment, her dull skin gathering a grimy look as the dust settled on its damp surface.

A cab would have been very pleasant, but Donna Laura did not take cabs, and at last the long walk came to an end and she rang at the door of the pension.

The pension was abhorrent to her; the dirty tiled floor, the slatternly servant, the stuffy room in which she was asked to wait, all revolted her.

That most horrid of flora, the rubber plant, was represented in the room by a wretched specimen in an atrocious pot, the arm-chairs were dirty and worn, and a small ill-conditioned dog yapped at the old woman from the sofa.

Donna Laura sat down in an upholstered cane-bottomed chair and waited.

At last the door opened and Mrs. Roper came in, pale but brisk.

"I hope," the little woman began at once, "that you have not come to tell me your son cannot marry my daughter, for we know it quite well, and are leaving Naples to-morrow——"

"I did not come to tell you that," Donna Laura answered, "or anything else. I asked to see your daughter, not you."

Milly Roper had a hot temper, she blushed furiously at the words. "My daughter is not well," she answered with some stiffness. "and anything you want to say to her you can say to me."

Donna Laura's face softened. Against her will she liked the little American's fiery self-defence. "I did not mean," she said quietly, "to be rude. It is my wish to see whether your daughter loves my son as much as he loves her. If she does—then they must marry."

Mrs. Roper stared, her pretty mouth unbecomingly open. "*My!*" she gasped, adding after a moment, going back on the wave of her emotion to the old-fashioned Americanese of her girlhood, "Say, do you really mean that?"

The marchesa nodded. "Yes."

Mrs. Roper sank into the biggest and dirtiest of the yellow brocade arm-chairs and burst into tears.

She knew that the marchesa was nearly as poor as herself, and that every traditional law of the Latin blood was against such a marriage, yet such was the queer power of the older woman that the younger accepted her words as absolutely final, and could have kissed Donna Laura's square, dusty boots. For Donna Laura had prac-

tically saved her life. Sappho loved young Gamba with a depth and strength that from the first had awed her mother; without young Gamba for her husband Milly Roper knew that her daughter could never be happy, and to see Sappho unhappy would, she honestly believed, have killed her.

"It is awfully sweet of you to come and see her," the little American began, when she had blown her nose. "I never dreamt you thought such a lot of her, but she really is the *loveliest* girl——"

"I do not 'think a lot' of your daughter, Mrs. Roper. She is pretty, and good, but I never liked her particularly. I am thinking, and it is only honourable to say so, entirely of my son."

Milly Roper sustained her gloomy gaze for a moment and then giggled. "Of course, of course," she answered, her voice still shaking, "you think *he's* perfection, and I think Sappho is. Well, as long as you arrange it, I don't care a row of pins what your *reasons* are——"

"Naturally," Donna Laura returned. "And now, Mrs. Roper, I wish to see your daughter alone."

While she waited there in her turn in the dingy, unwholesome room, Milly Roper did some hard thinking. For she could think.

Her peculiarly flower-like type of beauty, which, at its best, had been that of a delicious Tanagra figurine, softened by a skin like an apple blossom petal, had naturally prevented her cultivating this power so unusual in women of great personal charm. Her life had been a procession—always of one—between two endless rows of love-beset, passion-beset men, and men in those days of course did not really want the women they loved to think.

(I am given to understand that nowadays they no longer object to a little independent thought in the lady of their heart, but I write of pre-war days.) She had been, because of her beauty, which was of the rather doll-like kind so dear to Englishmen, supplemented by a singular, quite indescribable charm, the unconscious victim of a possibly unconscious, and certainly unformulated, conspiracy to keep her shrewd little brain the brain of a half-educated child of eighteen.

She had been called Airy Fairy Lilian, a Pocket Venus, Titania; she had been given naughty French novels which she failed to understand chiefly through her curious fibre of chilly American purity now so rapidly becoming obsolete; she had roared with delight at the most frivolous, and watched with unstirred senses the most passionate French plays; she had dined in *cabinets particuliers* alone with one man at a time, for years; she had driven in the Bois, in the Pincio—all over civilized Europe, in fact, with the man of the hour, for there had always been a Man of the Hour.

She had been pursued honourably, dishonourably, openly, secretly, delightfully, brutally, and she had never had a lover.

She had very little reputation left, at the age of forty-four, but her character was intact.

In short, Mrs. Roper was that all but extinct phenomenon the old-fashioned American flirt.

Englishmen, and still more Englishwomen, never understand this singular feminine type, but it existed, and its existence was not due altogether to coldness, or to a hateful pin-and-cork ambition.

She had loved the game for its own sake, and not being

a sexually passionate woman, she simply did not believe in the exasperation and suffering she caused.

Twice she saw men cry because of her treatment of them, and the only feeling roused in her by these tears was one of mild disgust. "It's so *silly*," she told a diplomat, who shot himself a few days later.

In the papers she read that his health had for a long time been very bad, and this to her explained not only the suicide but the tears. She never guessed that it was she herself who had driven the man to despair.

And now the woman with this past sat waiting while Donna Laura Gamba settled not only Sappho's but her own life—for there could be no question of her ever leaving her daughter. "I'll have a flat in that awful old vault of a palazzo," she told herself, "and every day Sappho will grow more Italian and I more American. They'll strap the babies up in those dreadful, hard pillows, and feed them on chocolate and olive oil, and Nino will call me mamma and kiss my hand, and—oh, that old marchesa! She's like—she's like a horse made out of iron; her hands are always cold; she never laughs—she coudn't; if she laughed her jaw would crack. And she'll pray, pray, pray from morning to night. I wonder if she'd have the 'cheek,' she broke off in sudden indignation, "to pray for *me*?"

This idea made her very angry, but a moment later she sank back again into her chair. "Let her! She can pray for me till she *busts* if only Nino and Sappho can be married."

Mrs. Roper never knew what happened upstairs in Sappho's room, between the young girl and the old woman who so respectfully disliked her.

Donna Laura came down at the end of half an hour with an unmoved face, and the simple statement that now that she knew Sappho loved Nino as he deserved to be loved, all was well, and the marriage preliminaries might be begun at once.

"I understand, signora," she went on in Italian, "that your daughter wishes you to stay always with her."

"Naturally."

"Not at all naturally to us Italians," Donna Laura pursued woodenly, "but perfectly feasible in this case. The palace is very large, and a pleasant apartment can easily be found for you——"

She held out her dark, big-boned hand, and on it Milly laid her delicate small one.

"Arrivederci," Donna Laura said, and Milly's voice sounded to her own ears very feeble as she echoed the word: "Arrivederci."

CHAPTER VIII

THE dawn of the day following the Marchesa Gamba's visit to the Pension Bandinetti was a dawn of an extraordinary beauty. As the stars paled an unusual, delicate pellucidity sprang out of nowhere and filled the east. It had no colour, this clearness, and still less was it a white light. It was like the word hush made visible, and for a long time the sleeping earth and the sleeping sea lay under its spell, the most delicate foliage unstirred by any touch of dawn-restlessness.

Sir Bartle and Lady Sandys had dined out that evening, and on coming in very late Lady Sandys waddled away at once to bed, and Sir Bartle joined Charles Bruce in the drawing-room.

"Hallo, Charles," the old man cried, well pleased, for he was pleasantly full of good wine, and had no wish to go to bed, "this is a surprise. Been here long?"

Bruce nodded. "About two hours. I dined up at the pension with the Ropers, and—then I thought I'd like to have a talk with you before I turned in."

The night was very warm, so the two men seated themselves on the terrace in a couple of comfortable basket-chairs, and lit cigars.

"So you've been with Milly Roper, eh?" the old man began suddenly, after a long silence, staring up at the star-encrusted sky that looked overcrowded, like some too rich rococo ceiling.

"Yes. Dined there."

"H'm! Depressed, I suppose?" Sir Bartle's eyes were still fixed on the sky, but his question gave Bruce an odd feeling that he was awaiting his answer with unusual attention.

"No," he returned slowly, "she didn't seem at all depressed."

"Ha! ha!" Sir Bartle's voice said. *I thought* not, by Jove!" But he was silent for a moment before he added: "Think she must have some plan for getting her own way about that handsome young fool, eh? Some nice little way of arranging things?"

There was an oddly unpleasant, jeering note in the old man's voice, at which Bruce looked sharply up. "What are you driving at, Uncle Bartle? I'm not going to tell you what was told me in confidence, but—you're using the wrong voice for speaking of Mrs. Roper."

"Oh!" Sir Bartle plunged round noisily in his creaking chair and took his big cigar out of his mouth. "The wrong voice, am I?" he said slowly. "Well, you *may* be right, but I'm a rich man, and rich men get to see very strange things. If you consider my voice suitable *now*, perhaps you'll answer a question. Was the Marchesa Gamba at the pension to-day?"

"She was. Two hours before I went and *made* Mrs. Roper and her daughter drive with me to Posilippo."

"Oh! Did M—Mrs. Roper tell you, or the girl? About the marchesa, I mean?"

"Mrs. Roper. And at Posilippo she and I took a little walk, leaving Miss Roper sitting by the sea, and Mrs. Roper told me something else—which I am not going to tell you."

Sir Bartle eyed him sharply. "I see. Well—I have

a more trusting nature than you, Charles, possibly because I've lived longer, possibly—not. And so I'm going to tell you of what happened to me this afternoon after tea."

"Fire away, Uncle Bartle."

"Well, your aunt was out paying calls and shopping, and I had a headache, so I lay down in that four-acre room they call my study. It was dark and comparatively cool, and I went to sleep almost at once. When I woke up——" Sir Bartle leaned over the side of his chair and spoke in an undertone for some time. For quite half an hour he talked, and Bruce did not interrupt him. Somewhere a clock struck two, all street sounds had little by little died out, the wind was folded away, only one or two windows in sight were lighted; dirty, mercenary, insanitary, romantic, beautiful Naples slept.

And still Sir Bartle went on with his amazing story.

When at last he finished it Bruce spoke: "And you took it for granted Mrs. Roper was in it? Well—she *wasn't*. She didn't know one thing about it, and it's my belief that unless you tell her, she never will know.

"Me tell her? But haven't I made it quite clear that I promised not to tell *any* one?"

"You've told me."

"Yes, but you're not a human being just now; you're a safety valve or—or a vein opener. I'd have burst a blood-vessel if I hadn't told you. Well, now," the old man went on, "did you ever get such a facer in your life, eh?"

"Of course," Bruce counter-questioned, "you're going to do it?"

"Am I, 'of course'? Perhaps you think it a joke,

to—to do a thing like that at the orders—for that's what it amounts to—of a perfect stranger? Kind of thing *you'd* do at once, without a moment's hesitation?"

Bruce knew him well and answered accordingly. "No," he said slowly, "I should—for various reasons—deliberate until the right moment was past. But then, I am not you. I have neither your impulsive kindness of heart, nor your pleasantly weighty money-bags!"

Sir Bartle peacocked gently on his chair. "I'm glad you think I ought to do it for—I've made up my mind that I will. After all it's only a matter of a few thousand pounds."

The two men talked on for another hour and a half, for Sir Bartle could not recover from his amazement at the whole thing, and told the story over and over again.

"There was I sound asleep, and when I waked up, there *she* was. More like an old witch than an old lady, but, by Jove, she's got an air about her. One can't help feeling that in spite of her shabbiness and her awful plain face, she's somebody. And no waster of words, either; liked that about her from the first. 'They love each other,' she said, 'and my son is willing to marry her as a very poor girl. As a penniless one, he *can't*.' "

Bruce nodded. "That's true, too."

"I know you are very rich and I know you are an old friend of Mrs. Roper,' she went on," repeated Sir Bartle for the third or fourth time, "'so I've come to ask you to give me a small sum of money to settle, not on my son, but on *her*.' I swear to you, Charles, the floor rocked under my feet. Not an apology, nor an excuse, nor any promise of gratitude. Not a damn thing except the main question, would I give her enough money to

settle a certain income of a thousand pounds on *Milly Roper's girl.*"

"As one idea'd as a steam pile-driver," the old man went on after a pause, "and as efficacious, by Jove! She pounded that blessed idea bang through what you may call the soft mud, and little shells and stones of my mind, into the hard earth under 'em, and it's there to stay! Only—" He broke off sharply. "I confess I thought it was a put-up job between the two of 'em—the two mothers, I mean—and that made my blood boil. Even as it is I don't see why *Milly* didn't ask me, we're old friends," he sighed sentimentally.

"Simply because it never would have entered her head to do so. She told me this afternoon that *Donna Laura* was going to make it all right, but she didn't seem to have asked even herself *how* it was to be done."

Sir Bartle lit a fresh cigar and took a drink of his brandy and water. "No," he agreed, slowly, "one doesn't ask how *Donna Laura* is going to get things done. I fancy that people who never explain *give* you that feeling of faith in their powers."

The stars had paled as if slowly drowning in the colourless clarity I have tried to describe, and between two vast ilex trees in the next garden the sea had turned to silver. The two men were silent for a few moments, Charles Bruce feeling that the dawn was an ancient one strayed from ancient Greece; it was an hour for nymphs and fauns and far-off shepherd pipings.

"She told me to make out the cheque to her, and that she would arrange the whole thing with her solicitors. She told me not to tell *any* one, not even your aunt, about it; she said it would be better that people should think

she had sold some of her own family jewels—as she would have done, she said, if she hadn't sold them years ago to save the family honour. And," Sir Bartle added simply, "I'm sure she *would* have done it. She's a terribly ugly woman, Charles, but she's *all right*, you understand."

"I quite understand. Must have been painful to her," Bruce went on, "to ask a perfect stranger to give her son money."

But Sir Bartle, puzzle-headed though he sometimes was, was oddly shrewd in certain ways. "Don't think she minded a bit," he declared, "she'd have asked for my *skin* if the boy had needed it. That kind of mother. And besides, my fortune, of course, must sound practically endless, counted in lire by a poor Italian. No, I don't think she minded a bit, and I liked her (though I didn't believe her) for saying that Milly didn't know a thing about it. Also, I liked her not suggesting my going with her to the solicitor's or—or keeping an eye on her in any way. Not at all. It was just 'you give me the cheque and I'll do the rest.'"

Bruce rose stiffly, for the morning air was chilly. "I must go now," he said, "I'm glad you decided to do it. There's no doubt at all about their loving each other, and for an Italian to be willing to marry Venus herself with only a thousand a year, proves that there is good in him. I—I think it will turn out well. Good night, Uncle Bartle."

Sir Bartle stood listening to the sharp echoing of his footsteps until the sound had died away, and then went to bed.

And that strange, radiant clarity still lay over the

southern earth and sea, and was never forgotten by several of the people who saw it.

Sappho Roper never forgot it, nor did Nino Gamba, who spent the night wandering about the heights behind the town, descending by the pension just as Charles Bruce walked back by the sea to his hotel.

Bruce never forgot it.

But best of all was it to be remembered by Donna Laura Gamba, who had passed the night at prayer in her chapel, and who, as she heard her son come in, went to his room and found him leaning in his open window.

"Mammina," he cried, horror-struck by her ravaged face, "you have not been to bed."

"I have been praying, figliuolino mio," she said, with the austere tenderness peculiar to her, "praying for you and your future wife."

The young man's beautiful face paled slowly at the word. "Then—then it's *really* all settled?" he stammered. "I dared not come home to ask you."

"Did I not tell you I would arrange it?" she asked, coldly reproachful, and he kissed her hands in passionate apology. "Of course, of course, and I was sure; for hours I was sure, mamma. But when the stars went out such an odd light came, and I was cold and hungry—and I wondered how you *could*."

Donna Laura looked up at the hills and saw trees and houses swimming as if in some new medium. "What a wonderful morning," she murmured. "Now you must go to bed, Nino mio. It is all in order, and you are to marry your Sappho. I wish it could have been one of Donna Maria's girls, but—you had a right to choose."

At the door she turned. "One thing, Nino. I promised San Giuseppe that she would at once become a Christian."

Nino nodded. "Of course she will, mamma," he answered, unbuttoning his beautiful but muddy boots, "and she is an angel already."

Donna Laura's iron face did not change. "You will take her to-morrow to call on Don Gaetano. Her instruction must begin at once."

Then she went back to the ice-cold chapel and spent another hour praying to be allowed not to hate her future daughter-in-law. Like most people who pray almost to the exclusion of every other duty, she had come to express her prayers in absurdly childish words.

"Dear Our Lord, Our Lady and Blessed St. Joseph," she now repeated an infinite number of times, "give me grace not to hate her, unpleasing and unreligious though she is. If there is anything worth loving in her, give me grace to discover it. And give me strength to bear the added cross of having her vulgar, brainless little mother in my house. Dear Our Lord, Our Lady and Blessed St. Joseph, — — — —"

Donna Laura was a good and conscientious woman, so there can be no doubt that her prayer was heard.

One wonders, with all reverence, what Our Lord, Our Lady, and St. Joseph thought of it.

PART TWO



PART TWO

CHAPTER I

ONE morning in November, eighteen months after her daughter's marriage, Mrs. Eustace Roper was busily dusting and tidying her salottino in the Palazzo Gamba.

It was a bright morning, the two big French windows were open, and Mrs. Roper, her pretty hair carefully shrouded by a charming white mob cap, having beaten every article of furniture in the room, was now spanking her books smartly with a little cane broom to free them of dust.

She had a great many books, for she was very fond of reading, and even now as she beat and dusted, the book-lover betrayed itself in her by the way in which, every now and then, she could not resist opening one of her treasures and, so to speak, taking a bite on which to chew as she went on with her work.

The room was a pleasant one, with the morning sun, and its over-great height was cleverly dissimulated by the way the little woman had painted it. To within seven feet from the ground the walls were distempered a delightful apple-green, and above the seven-foot line both walls and ceiling were of a rather deep orange. Thus treated the ceiling hardly looked noticeably high, and the colours suited Mrs. Roper very well.

Two sides of the room were lined with plain, white bookcases, the top row of which was used for bric-à-brac, photographs, etc., there was a low, black chesterfield, two very easy chairs in loose chintz covers and, enclosing the

high, grey-stone fireplace, two well-cushioned settles, and on the walls hung some good brown photographs, one or two water-colours, and a very fine silver-point etching of Mrs. Roper and Sappho, drawn when Sappho was eight.

Plants grew bountifully in the windows on dark-green stands, and two canaries flickered about in their cages, rejoicing in the sun and bubbling with song.

Mrs. Roper, who wore an old skirt and blouse, had rolled up her sleeves above the elbow and was singing with the birds as she worked.

She looked very well, and a little brown, after her second summer at Posilippo; she was glad to get home after her long villegiatura, for she had gone to visit a friend in Florence after the others returned to Naples, and the very feel of her humble little belongings was good to her.

She had brought gifts to Sappho, too; Florentine leather and parchment things, a hat from the Via Tornabuoni, silk from the Ville de Lyons for a petticoat, and sweets from Doney's. Even for Donna Laura she had brought a small present, a beautifully bound copy of the "Little Flowers of St. Francis."

She did not like Donna Laura, but she liked giving presents, and besides she was sorry for the granite-eyed old woman. During the eighteen months that had passed since the marriage, she had learned to be very fond of her son-in-law, but she also had learned to know him well enough to realize that whereas the real Nino suited *her* perfectly well, his very existence would be, did she suspect it, an almost unbearable shock to his mother.

It was not that she had discovered any grave faults in the young man; it was rather that she realized that whereas the old woman saw in her son an heroic statue, her

own undarkened eyes beheld him simply as he really was: the most beautiful and ingenious of talking dolls.

The fact that Sappho was beatifically contented with her Bébé Jumeau did not at all surprise her mother, who adored her daughter too much to try to cheat herself about her. She knew that while the girl's nature was deep and strong and pure, her brain was a second-rate one, and would never change.

Nino, with his sunny, merry nature, made Sappho perfectly happy; but his mother, who idolized him, could not have borne seeing how slight a creature he really was.

Mrs. Roper was thinking of these things as she put her well-dusted books back into their clean shelves. "Never knew such a sweet-tempered boy in my life," she reflected, "and never bored for a moment, either last summer or this, at that dull villa. To be sure he rode into town nearly every day, but still—and *how* he adores Sappho! Bless his heart, I do hope he'll like his cigarette case. How splendid she looks, too. A pity she must wear black, but I'll get her some really *good* things, and poor dear Lady Sandys deserves more mourning than most relations. Five thousands pounds is a lot of money, and I believe Donna Laura is quite right to want her to buy a string of pearls with it. *All* Italian women have them, and they're a good safe investment. Poor old Bartle, I bet he's real broken down without her! Well, Sappho'll cheer him up, and he can toddle up here a lot, and I'll play *bézique* with him though it bores me stiff.—"

The books were all where they belonged now, the red leather Kiplings, the little green Dickens, the never-opened Jane Austens, and the despised Merediths. For Mrs. Roper did heartily despise Meredith, because she

considered his style a disease; Thackeray she considered sneering; and as she always skipped "scenery," she said she couldn't afford to waste her money on Hardy.

It cannot be said that she had no literary taste, for she had a good deal, though there are those of us who would consider most of it bad. But although she was not afraid of scorning the gods, she rarely worshipped utterly vile images. Our English men and women of colossal sales she cursed boldly for the vulgarians they are, and though she slept over Elia, she had the unexpected grace of loving Trollope.

She had just decided that she must have a look at the Proudies and the Signora, doughty lady, in "Barchester Towers," when the door opened and Sappho came in.

The two women embraced tenderly and went into the bedroom, where Mrs. Roper's trunks were still only half unpacked, to look for the presents.

"I do hope you'll like your things, darling," Mrs. Roper said anxiously, as she knelt by an ancient sole-leather steamer trunk that had belonged to her husband.

"Of course I shall, mother dear; I'm just crazy to see them——"

The young Marchesa Gamba did not look as if she could possibly be "crazy" to see anything. Very serene and aloof was her air as she sat on the bed in her well-made, not new, coat and skirt; her smooth hair had already achieved something of the varnished look of Italian hair, and her whole person seemed to have broadened a little. She looked older than her nearly twenty-two years; she looked settled and enthroned for life; and she looked superbly content.

"Nino sent you his saluti affettuosi," she went on after a moment. "He is greatly looking forward to coming to lunch with you, but he had to go to the Fencing School this morning, so he could not come in to salute you."

"My goodness, Sappho," her mother sighed, laughing, "How it does grow on you!"

"What, mother?" Sappho's big eyes were filled with wonder, and at them her mother laughed again. "Why, your Italian-ness, of course. Nino and his saluti affettuosi, and his long string of words because he didn't drive me mad by interrupting me at my dusting!"

There was a little silence, and then Sappho said in her pretty, gentle voice: "I love his manners myself, darling, but if you like, I just needn't give you all his messages!"

Mrs. Roper rose, her arms full of parcels, her face rueful. "I was only teasing you, goose," she declared, not very truthfully. "His manners are charming, and you know I am a helpless victim to them. Now look, here are your things—let's go back into the salottino, it's so untidy here——"

"You're quite sure you don't mind our leaving you alone, Mammina?"

Nino Gamba stood, two hours later, fresh from his bath and very hungry, looking down at his mother as she sat reading by her bedroom window.

"Of course I don't mind, son. La Signora Roper kindly invited me, too, but, as you know, I do not digest her queer American food, and besides, she has not seen you and Sappho for six weeks, and will be glad to have you alone."

Donna Laura's equine face had grown longer, and greyer, and bonier in the past eighteen months, but her eyes glowed as she looked up at her beautiful son, and he beamed at her as if she had been as exquisite as Aurora.

"I don't much like the food, either," he confessed; "that 'maple siropo' is very revolting, and I like my chicken roasted, not soaked in white paste, but Sappho loves it, and her mother enjoys cooking herself, she *says*—though it doesn't seem likely!"

Donna Laura, who possibly considered that Mrs. Roper's taste for cooking betrayed a menial past, said nothing. She rarely uttered a word about her son's mother-in-law, for she was a woman who tried very hard to be just, and she saw that Mrs. Roper did her best not to annoy her.

Nino kissed her, and was about to leave the room when his mother stopped him. "I had a telegram from Sir Bartle this morning," she said, "from Rome. He arrives here by the evening train to-night, and I think you had better meet him."

Nino nodded, always ready to do anyone an easy good turn. "Va be, poor old man. He will be very lonely, I suppose—"

"No doubt. That is, of course, why he has engaged the apartment for this winter. Nino—he is a very rich man, and very fond of Sappho. It would do no harm for you both to take pains to make him feel happy here."

He stared at her, his spaniel eyes aglow in the warm sunshine. "You mean he might leave her his fortune? Don't you think he did enough in giving her her dot, and paying off the mortgages as a wedding present?"

"No. I do not mean that he might leave you his for-

tune. That plain man Carlo Bruce is his heir, but—he might leave you or—your son if you ever *have* one—a few thousand pounds."

Her hatred of plain people, so illogical in one so ugly as herself, did not strike Nino, but the bitterness in her voice as she referred to a possible son of his could not escape him, and his singularly sensitive colour changed to a yellower ivory.

"There you are again," he muttered sulkily, "always harping on it. After all, we haven't been married nineteen months yet."

He went out of the room, closing the door with a bang, for in spite of his protest he was ashamed of having no family and no prospects of one, and in his heart, without the least feeling of injustice, he blamed his wife.

But his moods, always as sincere as a child's never lasted long, and by the time he had reached Mrs. Roper's door he was again perfectly sweet-tempered, and whistling like a blackbird.

Jeanne Prou, formerly Lady Sandys's maid, and since Sappho's wedding hers—a special gift from the kind old woman—was coming upstairs from Sir Bartle's apartment, which she was helping to put in order, and smiled at him. "Buon giorno, Giannetta," he said kindly, "how goes the work? I hear Sir Bartle gets here to-night."

"Si, signor marchese."

"And Domenico, too, I suppose?"

The girl's smooth cheeks turned a shade paler as she shrugged her graceful shoulders. "Je le suppose, Monsieur le Marquis—"

Nino laughed. "Poor fellow, I'm afraid you lead him a devil of a life, Jeanne," he said carelessly. Then he

knocked at his mother-in-law's door, and Jeanne Prou, after looking after him for a moment, continued her way upstairs, her brows knit, her face still pale.

Sir Bartle, looking, rather to everyone's disappointment, considerably younger and gayer than he had done at the wedding, arrived at half-past seven, and, the Marchesa having engaged servants for him, Nino and Sappho and Mrs. Roper dined with him that same evening.

"Dear me, dear me," he said as he reached his place at the table, "it is very sad not having your poor aunt, that is to say, my poor wife, here."

"I am sure we all feel it, Sir Bartle," Sappho answered sincerely. "I have cried a great deal since your cablegram came in June.

Milly Roper regarded her plate steadily, for she dared not meet those merry eyes of her son-in-law. Nino's eyes were strange, for when he was not amused they looked full to the brim of unutterable woe, but whenever he wanted to laugh, and he felt he must not, there was no limit to their mirth and contagiousness; they literally danced in his head. They were now fixed on the wall somewhere behind Milly, and she dared not look up.

Sir Bartle was not a hypocrite, and there were real tears in his eyes as he regarded the high-backed, gilded chair in which his wife had sat a year and a half before, but they were tears of short duration, and presently he was laughing merrily as he related his adventures in Paris, where he had spent a week on his way South.

His poor Violet had died of a fit five months before, and while he was still very sorry for her in that she was dead, he cannot be said to have been any longer very sorry for himself for being without her.

These things Milly and Nino at once saw and understood, but Sappho, who had really loved Lady Sandys, and who still mourned her, pitied the old man deeply, and spoke to him throughout dinner in a voice that plainly rather puzzled him.

"You're looking very handsome, my dear," he said once, his eyes travelling with approval over her neck and shoulders, "but you're too young for black. I don't like to see it. I tell you, Milly," he persisted, raising his voice, "we can't have her wearing black. It makes me feel sad!"

After dinner, when Nino and his wife were at the piano going through a batch of new songs he had brought home to try, Mrs. Roper explained to Sir Bartle that Sappho's black was in honour of his wife.

"God bless my soul! Dear me now, is it really? Very kind of her, I'm sure, my dear, but after all, five months is five months, and——"

Milly promised to tell Sappho, and the subject changed. Sir Bartle was eager to tell her his plans; Naples agreed with him, it seemed, and he thought he'd stay on till after Christmas. Then he meant to try Egypt. "Never done the Nile, and should rather like to have a shot at it," he went on eagerly. He would hire a dahabeevah——

If it didn't suit him, what was to prevent his going on to India or Ceylon? He knew the Governor of Ceylon, too. For years he had done no real travelling, just pottered about on the Continent, — — — —

Poor Violet had almost succeeded in making an old man of him, "almost, but not quite," he added with a chuckle. "Poor girl! After all, what's fifty-eight nowadays?"

And because there was no malice in her she did not remind him that he, like the rest of the world, must have grown eighteen months older in the last eighteen months.

"If I was a little older," he went on as he drank his coffee, with two liqueurs, "or you were a few years younger, I might take you along as a niece, hey?"

"I fear," she answered gently, "that I am much too old to be taken for your niece, Bartle."

His obvious feeling of renewed youth, so often seen in old men who have just become widowers, amazed her a little, and roused in her an almost motherly feeling, though she was so much younger than he. She listened with sympathy to his plans, and then, at last, while Nino whispered love songs into his wife's ears at the other end of the room, he went to sleep, and he snored; but Mrs. Roper did not rejoice. She was a kind woman.

Two liqueurs with one's coffee are agreeable, and they certainly may be regarded as a banner of youth and freedom. In Sir Bartle's case, however, they produced uric acid, and a most unholy tongue the next morning.

He swore at Domenico and called that calm menial several very rude names, but Domenico did not seem to mind.

Domenico had grown a little bald, thus adding to his look of superiority, and he had put on weight, which increased his interesting resemblance to Lord Haldane.

"I am ver' sorry, Sair Bartle," he repeated gravely several times in answer to the wildest, most uncalled-for maledictions.

At last Sir Bartle got into his shoes, and the worst was over.

When he was leaving the room he turned: "I say, Domenico," he said hurriedly, "don't forget to ask the young signora marchesa to oblige me by letting Jeanne come down for half an hour after lunch. Mrs. Briggs packed the things her poor ladyship wanted her to have, and I wish to make her a little present myself. Her ladyship was very fond of Jeanne."

The man's face changed slightly, but he only bowed, saying, "Thank you, sir."

He was a silent, dour creature, Sir Bartle reflected on his way to the dining-room, but a very good servant. "I hope," the old man added to himself, "he won't insist on marrying the girl and leaving me before I've been to Egypt."

CHAPTER II

A DAY or two later as Sir Bartle was coming downstairs with delightful jauntiness, after lunching alone with Mrs. Roper, he stood still on the landing outside his own door, and turned a deep and ominous plum-colour with anger and surprise. “Wh-what the devil is this—rubbish—doing here?” he stammered.

The man he addressed, a small dark man, in a shabby coat, whose fox skin collar looked as if it were full of moths, paused in his job of raising a tattered old mattress to his back, and looked up, a marked lack of answering wrath in his wrinkled face. “I am taking the things upstairs,” he answered civilly.

“But where to?” roared Sir Bartle, eyeing with great disfavour the battered chest of drawers, the broken-seated chairs, and the pile of unpleasantly grimy bedding, over which he should have to step to get to his own door. “The Marchese Gamba and his family live upstairs, and an American lady,—you are making some mistake. You must have got into the wrong house——”

The man with the fox skin collar had now succeeded in balancing the rolled-up mattress on his head. “If you’ll get out of my way,” he said, disregarding Sir Bartle’s explanations, “I’ll get on with my work——”

Suddenly it occurred to Sir Bartle that he was speaking fairly good English. “Well, get your beastly things away from my door as quick as you can,” he said crossly; “I shall send the porter up to look into your doings——”

He drew aside and the other old man passed him, walking with a slow, sure step, and went up the stair. As he reached the middle of the flight, Sir Bartle, who had started down to look for the porter, heard his name called, and from under the mattress came surprising words. "Sir Bartle, I forgot to tell you my name. I am Don Ottavio Gamba, and I return to inhabit the 'ome of my ancestors."

Donna Laura was in the chapel hard at work praying, when Marietta came hurriedly in and broke every rule of decency by interrupting her. "Oh, Madonna mia," the woman cried, kneeling by her mistress and crossing herself perfunctorily, "of all things to happen! Signora marchesa cara, he has come with his rags to live here! Brought his bed on his head like the man in the Bible—he is in the hall now. Sitting on it——"

Donna Laura finished her Hail Mary, and after making her usual deep curtsey to the altar, led the way to the passage, "Now, you Mad-Enough-to-Chain-Up," she said, sternly, "tell me what you mean."

Marietta for answer led her to the turning in the passage, and pointed to where Don Ottavio indeed sat on his mattress, smoking a cigarette.

"Go," Donna Laura bade the woman, and when she was alone, she advanced up the long stone passage, her heavy boots making a great deal of noise on the carpetless floor.

"Buon giorno, Ottavio," she said coldly, "what foolish jest is this?"

Don Ottavio rose and bowed with ceremony. "It is no jest. I have returned in my old age to live in the house of my fathers."

"It is your way of avenging yourself on me for refusing to give you more money."

"To talk of revenge is to be melodramatic, my dear sister."

"You cannot possibly wish to live here. This is a gentleman's house."

Don Ottavio winced at her words, but he managed to laugh. "It is. It is my nephew's house, and therefore it is good enough for me in my broken-down old age. Which rooms am I to have? I should like the Cardinal's rooms."

"My son's mother-in-law occupies those of the Cardinal's rooms that are habitable. You may have two rooms at the other end of the picture-gallery, or two rooms upstairs—those upstairs are sunnier."

"The picture-gallery is full of rats, and you know that I am afraid of rats. The rooms upstairs are for servants, not for members of the family."

"You cannot have rooms on this floor because we should all of us dislike meeting you every day. You have a right to be sheltered by this roof, but no right to force yourself on us who do not want you."

Don Ottavio threw his cigarette on the stone floor, and crushed it with his worn-down heel.

"Look here, Laura," he said abruptly. "You can't possibly hate the sight of me any more than I hate the sight of you. I have written and asked you repeatedly to give me more money—or rather to *lend* me more, for I keep strict account of every penny I've had from you—and you have refused. You have some resources of which I know nothing, or Nino could not have married a penniless girl. The mortgages are paid off—oh, you

see, I know quite a lot of things—and so are Nino's debts. You could get that much money, and you can get more, and if you want to be left in peace by me, you've only got to loosen your purse strings a little and give me a decent allowance—until some of my speculations turn out well. If it's that purple-faced old Sir Sandys downstairs who's adopted my young Apollo of a nephew, you'll just have to turn the screw on him a bit. Otherwise I stay, and—well," he added venomously, "you'll wish I hadn't."

If Donna Laura had been a feminine Hercules instead of a feeble old woman; if she had had dozens of servants to guard her doors against him, she could not have used her powers to keep her abominable enemy out of the house.

The patriarchal system still holds good amongst old-fashioned Italians, and to Donna Laura, much as she loathed him, Ottavio Gamba had as good a right to a share in the old palace as if his life had been as blameless as her own.

"I would rather see you die," she answered quietly after a pause, "than ask anyone on earth to give you money. What little I have myself I have never refused to share with you, but I will do no more. If my daughter-in-law were a millionaire, I would not ask her for a penny for you. You may have the rooms at the end of the picture gallery—I do not think there are many rats—or the two sunny rooms upstairs. Choose, and Marietta will go down and help you bring up your things—I suppose you did not bring *only* your bed?" she added contemptuously.

At that moment Nino came running upstairs in riding

dress. "Hallo, Zio," he began boisterously, and then his face changed. "What's the matter, mamma?"

In a few words she explained, while he stood, slapping his boots with his cane, his dark eyes nearly hidden by their thick-fringed lids.

When she had ceased speaking he said quietly, "Ebbene, uncle, which rooms will you have, those at the other end of the picture-gallery, or——"

Don Ottavio damned the picture-gallery in vivid street language. Then he added sulkily, "Yes, I'll take those. I don't choose to sleep next to servants."

"I slept *with* Marietta till I was five years old," Nino drawled, hanging up his hat and cane and drawing off his gloves, "and the only other servant on that side of the house is my wife's maid, a very quiet, nice girl! However, if you'll come with me, I'll show you the rooms you have chosen."

The two men walked through the empty, echoing picture-gallery and came out at the extreme end of the front of the palace. "Do you remember this little stair? If you're really afraid of rats, you might use it at night. You reach the foot of it by turning off to the left from the Cardinal's rooms—remember?"

"I knew the palazzo pretty well before you were born," snapped Don Ottavio.

Nino showed him the rooms, in one of which were one or two shabby tapestried chairs and a couple of hideous Florentine mosaic tables, and then left him.

Don Ottavio, who was in one of his very rare rages, prowled about the two rooms for an hour or so, muttering to himself. He had utterly failed in his plot, for no

prospect on earth could have smiled on him less than did that of living in the palace.

He had come with his disgraceful belongings solely to blackmail Donna Laura into paying him off, out of the mysterious purse that produced Sappho's twenty-five thousand lire a year, and his failure was very bitter to him.

"Apoplexies to the lot of 'em," he snarled; "if ever I catch that nephew of mine out in anything, by God, won't I tell his mother!"

Marietta and the under-porter had laboriously carried his bed and the rest of his things down the long gallery and put them into the next room.

When they had gone, Don Ottavio opened the door and stood staring disgustedly at them. He had rejoiced, on Sir Bartle's landing, at their sordid aspect, but now he hated them. He hated everything.

"I can't stay here," he muttered, "I'd go mad in the evenings——"

Creeping quietly down the small staircase, he went out and hired two men to cart his rubbish back to his old rooms.

By good luck they met no one on their two journeys, and even the old porter was asleep in his box and did not waken as they passed. When they had gone, Don Ottavio stood for a few moments by the window in the room that would have been his bedroom, and by chance noticed that he had from it a view into his sister-in-law's bedroom. She was sitting by the window, indeed, sewing.

Vaguely the old man felt that a possible advantage might accrue to this outlook. He drew back for a mom-

ent, watching Donna Laura's unconscious face, and then, slowly and coldly, he cursed her.

After which, locking both his doors, he went noisily down the picture-gallery whistling a music-hall tune and banging with his heels.

As he left the gallery he met Marietta. "I hope the rooms are all right?" the woman asked politely enough, her unfixed eye staring off at a tangent.

Don Ottavio nodded, "Thank you, Marietta mia," he returned, in a friendly way, handing her two lire in silver, "the rooms are just what I need, and thank you for bringing up my things."

Then he went his way, fingering the two door keys lovingly in the darkness of his pocket.

Sappho Gamba was a gentle, sweet-natured girl, but on certain points she could be extremely obstinate, and one of these points was her refusal to see a doctor about her childlessness. She was shy and very sensitive on this particular point, because she felt that her husband secretly blamed her for a circumstance of which he, like every Italian in his position, was ashamed.

According to the southern way, his friends teased him because he had as yet no son, and "not even a daughter."

"He's afraid to have a child lest it might not be a second Apollo," one man cried; and another added, "These brainy chaps are always bad at reproduction!"

No one meant any harm, or the slightest disrespect to Sappho, but many of their jokes would not bear translation, and no Anglo-Saxon could have listened to them without embarrassment, and besides the jokes, old friends of the young man's parents would stop him in the street

and gravely condole with him. His hurried protests that after all he and his wife were both still young, and had been married only a year and a half, met serious shakes of old heads, and floods of advice.

For a long time he said nothing of all this to Sappho, but about a week after Don Ottavio's supposed instalment in the picture-gallery rooms, he came to her one afternoon with an open letter in his hand, and a look of unusual determination on his face.

"I've had a letter from Donna Palmira Sacchetti, darling," he said, "with the address of a very good doctor. Her elder daughter-in-law had no child for over two years, and this man Lemmi set her right in a week—let me see—" He sat down and began looking through the thin pages crowded with spidery purple writing. "Here it is—Il dottor Piero Lemmi, Via della Crusca 11, terzo piano. She says—yes, here it is! 'I took Elena there, and we found him very nice indeed, and very delicate in every way, and I need only tell you that within eight weeks of our visit our darling Angiolino was on the way! Do take your wife to Lemmi at once, my dear Ninetto. Tell him I sent you, and he will, I am sure, do his very best for you'—now that's good news, isn't it?"

For a moment the silence was unbroken, and then Sappho asked slowly, "Did you write to Donna Palmira, Nino?"

"I did. You see, Bébé Sacchetti was teasing me at the club the other evening—"

"*About what?*" Sappho's usually soft voice had something of the quality of a pistol shot as she said the two words. He stared at her. "Oh, well, just joking because—because we hadn't yet made a baby—"

She rose very slowly and walked to the window. It was late in November, and after five o'clock, and she looked out into almost complete darkness, but she stood there for some time, her forehead pressed to the glass, her eyes wide open.

Nino was alarmed. He had never seen her in such a mood before, and after a moment he rose, and went to her and put his arm about her waist. She did not move or even stir, but presently she asked in a haughty voice, "Do you allow people to make such ill-bred jokes to you?"

"They are not ill-bred, as they are made by well-bred Italians."

"They are vulgar, whoever makes them."

He drew away. He was a thoroughly unconceited young man, but his pride of caste was very strong, and he had never for a moment forgotten that his wife, though he adored her, was "only an American," and, so far as family was concerned, not even one of the best of her race.

"I do not like you to call my friends vulgar, cara," he said, using really great self-control.

"I do not like you to *have* vulgar friends," she retorted, her voice quivering with anger. "And I will not have you write to horrid old women with whiskers about—about such holy things."

Donna Palmira Sacchetti did have whiskers, but Sappho knew she did wrong in referring to them. She hated Donna Palmira, however, for her advice, and her addresses, and above all for her sympathy. "Lots of people *never* have children at all," she cried, bursting into tears, and rushing back to the fire, "and people don't joke about it, and write to horrible old women about it—"

Nino had himself often laughed at the good old wo-

man's whiskers, but he was glad to have Dr. Lemmi's address, and he was perhaps even gladder to have Sappho for once thoroughly in the wrong.

"Don't talk rubbish," he said, with much dignity. "I will leave you now, and I am dining with some of my vulgar friends at the club, but to-morrow at eleven we will go to see Dr. Lemmi."

"I will *not* go to see Dr. Lemmi, or any other doctor," she answered, suddenly calm. "I am perfectly healthy, and so are you, and if—if we are meant to have children we will have them in time."

"There has never been a Gamba without a family——"

"In that case there will not be one now. My mother had four brothers and sisters and they all had immense families. My father was one of nine, and *they* all had big families."

At the door Gamba turned again. "Please be ready," he said courteously, "to leave at eleven. I will ring Dr. Lemmi up this evening so that we shall not have to wait."

But neither the next morning nor any other did the Marchese and Marchesa Gamba call on the useful Piero Lemmi. Sappho, with an obstinacy that seemed almost incredible to her husband, flatly refused to go, and short of making a ridiculous scene he could not force her to do so.

Donna Laura implored her to be a good Gamba and obey her husband; Mrs. Roper advised her to shut Nino up once and for all by giving in on this really unimportant point; even old Sir Bartle tried his hand at persuading her. All in vain. To a doctor Sappho would not and did not go.

When Nino found that he was really beaten, he gave

in at once, but in his own way. He lunched and dined almost always at the club, or at some restaurant with friends, he went night after night to the opera, sleeping in his dressing-room to avoid awakening his wife, and as time went on he saw less and less of her.

His face grew a little bony, a little white, but he sang and whistled whenever he was in the house, and his politeness to Sappho was greater than ever.

He had never been seriously thwarted before, and this was his way of accepting the inevitable.

Sappho for her part went every morning to Mass—she had become a conscientious though not perfervid Catholic,—and spent most of her time with her mother, and her face, too, began to show its delicate bones.

She never referred to her trouble, and Mrs. Roper loved her with too much wisdom even to approach the subject.

For a while it seemed that every one in the house was in trouble of some kind, and Marietta, who, of course, believed Don Ottavio to be occupying the rooms by the picture-gallery, was convinced that the wicked old gentleman had put a charm on the palazzo.

This belief came to a head on the day of the great storm which took place in mid-December. For a week the skies had been dark and lowering, and now for some hours a violent wind had raged over the city, tearing at her roofs, roaring under her gables, pouring down her narrow streets as if it meant to destroy her altogether.

Towards evening Mrs. Roper, who had been out, was coming upstairs when she heard the sound of a woman sobbing violently. For a moment she thought it was Sappho, and her heart stood still, and then Domenico burst out of an unoccupied room belonging to Sir Bartle's

apartment, and Mrs. Roper realized that the sobbing came from behind him.

"What's the matter?" she asked the man sharply.

"It—it is nothing, signora," he returned, in extreme confusion. "I—I will close the door."

But she waved him aside. "Oh, no, you won't, my good man. It's poor Jeanne, and—Jeanne, you poor thing," she went on, entering the room, "what on earth is the matter?"

Jeanne lay in a big, round chair, her hair untidy, her face swollen and wet.

"Oh, madame," she gasped, as Domenico came in, too, and closed the door. "Oh, madame, je souffre trop."

"Of course you do, my dear. *Souffrir* at all is too much to *souffrir* about a man! What have you been doing, Domenico?"

Domenico, looking the picture of respectability, stood patiently by the door. "Madame," he answered with courtesy, "for two years I have wished to marry Jeanne."

"After all," Mrs. Roper remarked, "that's hardly enough to make you cry like that, ma pauvre fille!"

Jeanne sat up and blew her nose with Latin abandon. "And now that I want to," she explained, "he won't."

"My!" said Mrs. Roper.

Domenico cleared his throat. "Madame," he began, with a slight touch of the oratorical in his manner, "feelings change. Mine have changed. Mademoiselle Jeanne is a young girl of the most excellent, I have for her a respect without end, but—love? No. When I loved her she tortured me, and—my love died, so to speak, on the rack."

Mrs. Roper reflected a moment. "I remember, Jeanne,

you *did* torment him, we all used to notice it. But, surely, Domenico, you can forgive that now that you see she *wishes* to marry you?"

"Nossignora, scusi. If you are conversant with the opera Carmen, you will recall the lines about love's being a child of Bohemia. That is true. It is here, you feel it, and the next moment it has gone. I cannot marry Mademoiselle Jeanne, though I repeat that she is a young girl for whom I have the most profound——"

With a queer cry Jeanne pushed him to one side and left the room, and the next moment they heard her knocking at Sir Bartle's door.

"She has gone to give notice," Domenico remarked; "that is good."

Two hours later the storm broke, and catching poor Sir Bartle as he got out of his brougham, it blew him against the wall and broke his right leg.

Mrs. Roper sat up all night with the old man, who was in great pain, and despite her fatigue she blessed the storm, for she knew that it had blown the terrified Sappho back into her husband's welcoming arms.

CHAPTER III

DONNA EUSEBIA SCHIOPPA had just had a very tiring séance, and lay sleeping in the sun by her window. She was a vast, yellow woman of tallowy aspect, and appeared, in her loose purple silk jacket, to be many-breasted, like some Indian idol.

A cylindrical iron stove on four legs—the kind of stove known in Naples as a “pig”—filled the exhausted air with a dry heat, for little red flannel sausages filled with sand lay on the window-sills to keep out any possible intruder in the way of a gust of fresh air.

On the red-velvet draped table near the sleeping woman stood a big glass bowl of water, two packs of dirty cards, a crystal ball in a frame of yellow wood, and a small brass brazier; the implements of Donna Eusebia’s trade—or art, as she called it—for she was a magician.

It is against the law in Italy, as it is in England, to tell fortunes, but Italians are almost, if not quite, as credulous as English people, so the profession is an extremely lucrative one there.

Donna Eusebia, who was, like more or less all Neapolitans, a “camorrista,” cheated whenever she could, by means of information found for her by fellow-camorristi about her clients, most of whom, on arriving, found themselves unavoidably put off by stress of work until the next day; but she had an authentic gift for mind-reading, and could go into perfectly real trances in which much odd information would come to her, and vastly enhance her reputation.

That afternoon a senator from Rome had called and though she recognized his face she had been obliged to go into a trance as she knew little about him, and hence it was that now, at four o'clock, she slept. In the kitchen old Donna Elvira, Donna Eusebia's servant and mother, was washing clothes and singing to herself in a ghostly old voice. Garibaldi, the ancient parrot, sat moodily in a corner of his cage near the open door longing to cry out "Evviva l' Italia," but knowing that he would be punished by an hour of utter darkness if he disturbed his mistress.

He had always hated Donna Eusebia, and he feared her, and he feared the annihilating descent on his cage of her horrible old cape that smelt of squirrels.

All was very quiet in the hideous, sordid room, when the outside door opened suddenly, and Don Ottavia Gamba came in. "Donna Eusebia," he cried, looking at her with an odd mixture of loathing and respect in his ripe-olive-like eyes, "wake up, here's a client!"

In two minutes Donna Eusebia knew: that a young woman had just paid a little boy twenty centimes to climb the endless stairs to find out if the magician were to be seen; that Don Ottavia had paid the little boy ten centisimi to linger on his way up; that the young woman had not seen Don Ottavio, who had watched her from behind his blind; that she was, oddly enough, a French girl in the service of his nephew, the Marchese Gamba; that she was in love with an Italian valet who had formerly cared for her, but was now tired of her—a man in service with an English lord; that the man's name was Domenico, the girl's Jeanne, and that the two had quarrelled a few days ago.

When Jeanne finally reached the top floor of the house and rang at the brass bell, an old, old woman with a dark tongue and no teeth, told her that Donna Eusebia was asleep, but that she would see if she could wake her.

Jeanne was very nervous. Her eyes were dark-ringed, her little white teeth tore continuously at the dry skin of her lips.

Donna Eusebia was very kind to her, and said before Jeanne had spoken, that she supposed Jeanne had not been in Naples long.

"Son Napoletana," the girl replied doggedly, but the magician smiled.

"Signorina, no. You are not of our land, though your land has robbed us of part of what was ours."

Then Donna Eusebia asked her what price she wanted to pay for her séance. "The bowl of water," she said, "is five lire, the cards ten, and the crystal"—she hesitated—"fifteen."

"Of course, the crystal is the best."

"Signorina, with me all is good. But the bowl of water costs five lire, the cards ten, and the crystal—"

"I'll have the crystal," the girl interrupted, opening her smart leather bag and producing the money.

For a long time she sat there, the crystal ball in her hands, while the magician stared fixedly into it, thinking, thinking. She was not a bad girl, and for the first time in her life she was in love. Her love was a fierce, restless thing that gave her no peace, and now that she must give it up she felt that she would die. It had been, moreover, herself who had ruined her chance of marriage, and she knew it. She had done no more to hurt Domenico than thousands of other girls had done to hurt the man who

loved them, and yet he could not, would not, forgive her. Two years before, when he had just come to Sir Bartle, he had urged her to marry him, and she had refused him out of coquetry and a born love of using her power. And now, now when she would give her soul to marry him, he refused.

"I see," murmured Donna Eusebia from close to the ball, "a man. A man of our race. His name is—Demetrio—no—Davide—no, but I see a D—and you love him."

Jeanne started. "You live under the same roof; he is in a position of great trust; he is a soft-footed man, pale, with distinguished manners. Yes. Distinguished manners, and now I can see his name. His name"—Donna Eusebia's voice grew stronger—"is Domenico."

The fat woman's large, candle-coloured hands caught the crystal as the girl's small white ones relaxed.

"I—it's wonderful," Jeanne murmured, "but, go on, signora. Can you say if—if the man I love loves me—at all? I don't ask for much, but does he care just a little?"

"He loves you. He loves you *del fondo del cuor'*, but—you have hurt him. His pride is hurt, and that is the worst hurt a man can have. His vanity, I mean, rather."

Jeanne stared vaguely into the crystal, which was now prismatic from her tears.

"Also," droned on the fat woman, "you made the mistake of pursuing him. They hate that, men do. The most revolting man is vain enough to think he has only to make a choice. Yes, yes, they are like that."

Jeanne looked up dreamily, and her voice was vague as she spoke.

"I never pursued him at all until just lately, and then—and then I saw he was changed and unhappy, and—and—"

"And you thought it was your chance. You mistake, cara mia. It's *never* the woman's chance, and, besides, it's so easy to make them think they are doing the hunting when we are!"

Donna Eusebia laughed so noiselessly that only the soft shaking of her amorphous body indicated her amusement.

"Si, si, it is easy to fool them," she went on comfortably, "and, besides, it is always worth while." Again she bent low over the crystal, and there was silence.

Presently the girl asked timidly: "Can you advise me what to do *now*? I—I am very unhappy. Soffro troppo, troppo—"

But Donna Eusebia had told what she considered enough for fifteen lire, and shook her head as she drew back into her chair. "I see no more. Clouds—mists—The ball is now clear. Perhaps in a few days—"

Jeanne Prou put on her well-fitting, black gloves and rose. This is December twenty-second," she said. "We have illness in the house, and Christmas is coming, so I am extra busy, but I might get here a week from to-day. . . ."

"The twenty-ninth," murmured Donna Eusebia, producing from her pocket a singularly dirty, penny note-book, and writing down the date in it with a stump of pencil which she first licked. "Si, si, the twenty-ninth. Arrivederci Signorina *Cheanne*," she added suddenly, and Jeanne made her way down the filthy staircase full of awe at the magician's powers.

The girl was really suffering atrociously. For nearly a week the man she loved had barely spoken to her, and she felt that he despised her. She had, indeed, spread her simple net for him, and he had stumbled into it, but she was too clever not to see that he was now ashamed of himself and disgusted with her, and that nothing on earth could ever bring him back to her in the way she wanted.

Marriage would help her, though she wanted more, and now it looked as if even marriage were not to be for her.

When she reached home Marietta told her that the Signora Marchesa was downstairs with Sir Bartle, and wanted her to come there at once.

She tidied her hair, took a drink of sugared water for her nerves, put on a clean apron, and went downstairs. Domenico opened the door, and looked austere at her. "The Signora Marchesa is in the bedroom, and you are to go there," he said.

He was very pale, she noticed, and remembering the magician's words, held out her hand timidly: "Domenico," she said in an undertone, "*you used* to care for me. Is it, indeed, all gone?"

"In the bedroom, Mademoiselle Jeanne," he answered rather loudly, crossing the ante-room and opening the bedroom door.

Poor Sir Bartle's accident had happened over a week ago, but he still suffered great pain, and was the most fractious and unmanageable of invalids. He had also become very sentimental about his dead wife, and to Mrs. Roper's amusement now posed as the most inconsolable of widowers.

Sappho, who believed in his grief, and whose patience was inexhaustible, sat by him for hours every day, encouraging him in his outpourings, and meeting his lamentations quite half-way. She now sat under the shaded light, changing the cold cloths on the invalid's forehead (which went further back when he was in bed than when he was up), listening with real interest to his meandering reminiscences of his wife.

"Yes, indeed," he was saying, as Jeanne came in, "you *ought* to love her memory, Sappho; she loved you as if you had been her own daughter. Never forgot you either, all the year before she died, and one of the last things she did was to put you down in her will for that £5,000. Ah, my poor Violet, there was never a woman like her."

"Me voici, Madame la Marquise," said Jeanne, softly. Sappho rose. "I must go now, dear Sir Bartle, we have a very old dinner engagement for to-night. Mother will come down to you at about eight. I thought you'd like Jeanne to sit with you for a while—she seems a kind of link with dear Lady Sandys——"

"But should I not dress Madame la Marquise first?" Jeanne protested, her eyes fixed on Sappho with a look of almost passionate devotion.

"No thanks. My mother will help me, and everything is ready." The young woman bent down and kissed the old man's hot cheek.

"You'll come in on your way upstairs, will you?" he asked anxiously, "this damn leg aches so, there's no danger of my being asleep."

Sappho promised and went away, and Jeanne took her place. Sir Bartle's nerves were very much upset by his

accident, and he had grown a good deal older again. Jeanne was sorry for him, and very gentle in her simple ministrations.

“You’re a good gell, Jeanne, a good gell,” he said after a while, “and your poor mistress was very fond of you. She used to say she’d give you a handsome wedding present if ever you married Domenico. Why,” he went on after a pause, with the keen interest often felt by invalids in the private affairs of those who nurse them, “*don’t* you marry him?”

Jeanne laid a fresh cloth on his forehead. “I don’t think,” she said gently, “that he any longer has any wish to—to marry.”

“The devil he hasn’t! Then I’d like to know what’s changed him! It isn’t three months since he told me—it was at Harrogate, I remember—that his one wish was to marry you and settle down somewhere in Tuscany.”

Jeanne’s teeth tore at her lips, and Sir Bartle’s little hot blue eyes seemed to rise out of his head as he watched her.

“I—I don’t think he has any wish to marry,” she repeated faintly. During this last week or ten days she had been tortured by a vague, horrifying presage of evil. Her right eyelid constantly itched, and she had long since picked up the Italian superstition that this is a sign of impending trouble. She felt that something dreadful was going to happen; that she was to prove to be one of the many luckless women whose whole lives are ruined by one mistake.

As Sir Bartle stared up at her from under his bandage this feeling came over her again, and this time so strongly that she nearly lost consciousness.

"What's the matter? What's the matter, I say?" she heard Sir Bartle's voice say, as if from a great distance, and with an immense effort she answered that she had a bad headache.

"Headache, nonsense! Look here, Jeanne, your poor mistress was very fond of you, and if she were alive she'd know what to do for you now."

Jeanne smiled faintly, for she knew perfectly well what Lady Sandys would have done had she been alive and known the truth.

"But your poor mistress is gone, and I must just do the best I can," the old man went on, really anxious to help her, but also enjoying the excitement of the situation. "If Domenico is treating you badly, all you've got to do is to tell me, and I'll settle him in double-quick time!"

"Domenico is not treating me badly, Sir Bartle, thank you."

"Do you mean that you don't want to marry him?"

But the sudden appearance of Domenico in the doorway at that moment was more than her nerves could bear, and with a low cry she rose and ran past him and out of the apartment.

There was a short pause, and then Sir Bartle said severely: "Domenico, you are making that poor girl unhappy."

"I am very sorry, sir."

"But damme, you've no right to do it!" Sir Bartle's evening fever was beginning to creep up, and he had really been moved by the pain in Jeanne's face. Besides, like everyone else, he enjoyed judging his fellow-men.

Domenico stood respectfully at the foot of the bed, very decent, very "distinguished in manner" as Donna

Eusebia had said of him, very respectable. His pallid face had an odd look of having been recently remodelled; the cheeks seemed flatter, the nose more pinched. His sleek hair looked damp.

"It's plain to be seen that she—she cares for you," Sir Bartle went on, "and you can't deny that it's your own doing that she does. Her poor ladyship often spoke of your—your affection for the girl."

Domenico cleared his throat. "Excuse me, Sir Bartle," he said slowly, "but that is the wrong word, 'affection.' When I met Mademoiselle Jeanne I fell in love with her. It was not affection. Speaking with respect, it was a passion, an obsession. She did not return it and it—it perished, Sir Bartle. Obsessions do."

"God bless my soul!" Sir Bartle, like many of his kind, could face facts better than the names of them. The word passion sounded barely decent to him, and obsession he had never uttered in his life. Domenico was silent. He had said his say.

"Then—then you mean to say you've had the—the cruelty to tell the poor girl you've 'got over' it, and no longer want to marry her?" Sir Bartle spluttered at length, throwing his bandage on the floor and half sitting up in bed.

"Yes, sir. Mademoiselle Jeanne is a young woman for whom I have——"

"Oh, shut up, Domenico!"

It was Mrs. Roper who interrupted the Italian's tribute to Jeanne, and she explained to Sir Bartle as she sat down that the man was like a parrot. "'A young woman for whom he has the greatest respect,'" she quoted gibingly. "He's been saying it to me every time I see

him for the last week—it's a gramophone record inside him. *Fichez-nous le camp, Domenico,*" she added.

Domenico spoke very correct French, and he had not much of an opinion of ladies who told him to *ficher le camp*, but he was glad to leave the room, and at once went to his own bedroom, where he locked the door and stretched himself face down on the bed.

It was true that he had wanted to marry Jeanne, and now no longer wished to. It was true that he had refused to marry her. But it was not true that he had got off, as Mrs. Roper declared him to have got off, scot-free. Only one thing short of death ever remodels a human face in a few hours, and that one thing is intense mental suffering.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Charles Bruce arrived in Naples in mid-January, he found things much as they have been described in the last chapter. Sir Bartle's old bones were slow in mending, Sappho was still steadily refusing to see a doctor, and Nino, though he was too proud to go on imploring her to do so, was sore and sensitive about his lack of family prospects.

Since the night of the storm he and Sappho had been on ordinary marital terms, and he was plainly as much in love with her as ever, but he was a disappointed man, and allowed his disappointment to be visible to everyone. He spent more time at his club than he had formerly done, and as she frankly disliked Italian opera and he loved it, he went for an hour or so at least nearly every night to the San Felice.

Sappho was not unhappy, for she adored her husband, but she bitterly felt his disappointment, and her mother knew that many were the masses she had said to the intention of a child.

Her simple nature was one that readily adopted all the charming, childlike features of her new faith: she loved burning candles to saints and for those she loved; her room was hung with blessed pictures, crucifixes, rosaries and little holy books.

Once she told her mother that she was making a novena—a nine days' prayer—for a child.

"Do you think that will do any good?" Milly asked abruptly.

Sappho hesitated. "I—I don't know. Of course, you mean that God would send us one if He thought it right, but—it can't do any harm to ask, can it?"

Donna Laura was nowadays rarely seen by her daughter-in-law and her daughter-in-law's mother. Once a week they all dined together in Sappho's vast, shadowy dining-room, and once a month or so the two mothers-in-law brewed tea for each other and laboriously made conversation together, but the dinners early became dialogues between Nino and his mother, and Sappho and her mother, whereas the tea parties were afflictions to both the women, and grew shorter and shorter in duration as time went on.

The winter was an unusually severe one for Naples, a bitter tramontana howling day after day through the narrow streets, and Sappho, who had, as her mother had prophesied, Italianized herself to an astonishing extent, rarely went out except in her tightly-closed little brougham. Mrs. Roper, on the contrary, trotted bravely about the streets every day, looking in shop windows, calling on various people with whom she had made friends, even taking walks into the country and getting back after night-fall, to Donna Laura's undisguised horror.

She was well and robust, in spite of her slenderness, and, still more to Donna Laura's horror, had one or two admirers who came to tea or even to dinner with her, and who brought her flowers. Very fond of cooking, and proud of her charming little kitchen, it was a great delight to her to cook a meal for a friend, and never did she forget one evening when Donna Laura had come in to borrow some court plaster for Marietta who had cut her hand, and found Prince Giorgio di San Gervasio with

a towel round his neck peeling potatoes, while his hostess prepared a fowl for its apotheosis à la Maryland.

San Gervasio was not at all embarrassed, but, Donna Laura felt that her whole social order had been put to shame by her son's dreadful mother-in-law. This Milly saw and inwardly chuckled at.

A few days later, on the occasion of one of the painful tea parties, Donna Laura broached the subject.

"I suppose you have known San Gervasio for many years?" she asked severely.

Mrs. Roper laughed. "No, indeed. Never saw him till about a month ago."

"But—then why did you put a towel round his neck?"

"To keep his coat and vest from being splashed! We had great fun cooking and he ate nearly a whole chicken!"

Donna Laura poured out the strange, boiled tea into her best cups. It had been an outrageous episode she thought, but suppose, after all, it were not what it looked. Suppose it was really just the silly prank Mrs. Roper seemed to want her to believe. After all, she *was* Nino's mother-in-law.

"Signora Roper," she said slowly, "I do not talk scandal, but Giorgio di San Gervasio is a man of the very worst reputation."

"Is he? Do you know," Milly answered, swallowing a mouthful of tea bravely, "I somehow thought he was rather a gay bird!"

"'A gay bird'?"

"Yes. Fast—wild—well *bad*, I suppose you'd call it. But he's awfully *nice*!"

Donna Laura stared at her. "He is a man no woman is safe with."

"My! Guess he won't hurt me much, though." She chuckled softly, for Don Giorgio had at the very outset of their acquaintance made a little mistake about her, and she felt that she had showed him the error of his ways with some skill.

He was a man of fifty-odd years, who slipped in and out of love nearly every day of his life. His intentions were usually very bad, but he had a sense of humour and, what is of course rare in a man of his stamp, he did not necessarily turn against a woman for rejecting his advances.

He did not in the least understand Milly Roper, in whose virtue he had no belief at all, but she had made it plain that she was not for him, and her queer American ways diverted and puzzled him. Hence he took to coming rather often to see her, drank her tea and ate her cunningly compounded American cakes with a vast appetite, and every soul in the great old house, except Sappho and Sir Bartle, believed him to be her lover.

Nino Gamba was convinced of it, and wondered greatly at the calmness with which his proud and dignified young wife referred to "mother's friend."

A little later there appeared on the scene a young Artillery captain named Pietro Mola. He fell in love with Mrs. Roper at the opera one night, asked Gamba to introduce him, and instantly developed into a great bringer of flowers and a serious nuisance. He declared his love at least twice a week, glared with smitten eyes at San Gervasio, who delighted in rousing his jealousy, and finally, in his hopeless stupidity, actually called on Donna Laura to beg her to urge his suit with the bellissima Signora Roper.

These things amused and cheered Sir Bartle, to whom Milly related them with perfect truth and great detail, but they bored Bruce.

Mrs. Roper was undoubtedly a very pretty woman, but she was well over forty and ought not, he thought, to have such undignified adventures.

"It's unfair to blame me about Mola," she said to him once, when they had met on the Chiaja and were walking home together. "I didn't even *see* him at the opera till Nino brought him to the box and introduced him. I've told him how old I am and—*he doesn't believe me!* You see, it's rather a feather in a young man's cap here for him to be hopelessly in love with someone. They thrive on it!"

"Do they!" Bruce spoke rather drily.

She glanced up at him with a quiet movement of her beautiful eyes. She wondered when he would begin to suspect that he himself was in love with Sappho! She had known it since before the wedding, but she supposed the knowledge had not yet penetrated his thick, British skull.

Like many Americans she liked English people and despised English characteristics.

A short time ago she had read a remarkable little study of an English peasant by Stacey Aumonier, and she had literally loathed the unimaginative, slow-witted man who travelled all through the Holy Land, lost his sweetheart, nearly lost his life, without being moved, to cry over the death of his old dog at home. She could have beaten this man, whom she mistakenly regarded as a fool, and the sympathy with which the character was drawn made her want to beat Mr. Aumonier as well.

Now she watched Charles Bruce, who was a clever, thoughtful man, and wondered how he *could* be such an ass as not to know that he was in love with her daughter.

As a matter of fact, Bruce had known before she did, but he had no idea of confiding in her or in anyone else, and he had not the slightest objection to being considered slow-witted.

"So Jeanne is really leaving?" he asked, after a pause.

She nodded. "Yes. Domenico has treated her horribly, and she is really quite ill about it. Things got to such a pitch that either he or she *must* leave, and as he is invaluable to Sir Bartle, and Sappho would just as soon have an Italian, Jeanne is going. Poor girl, I believe she really *loves* Sappho. I sometimes see her watching her—Jeanne watching Sappho, I mean—in the queerest way."

"I imagine there's a bit of mystery about it, if we only knew," Bruce returned. "Domenico was very much in love with her when I was here before."

"Yes, he was. You ask him, however, and he'll explain. He says it was an 'obsession,' and, of course, obsessions do pass! I believe she has a good place, and it certainly will be better for her not to be thrown constantly with the man, but we're sorry to lose her, and, as I say, she evidently hates to leave Sappho."

Sir Bartle, who now spent his time in his four-acre study, was having a tea party when they went in. Nino and Sappho were there, and two pretty Scottish girls from one of the big hotels, and Donna Palmira Sacchetti, who had brought her little grandson, Angiolino, who had already eaten quite two pounds of chocolates and showed no signs of stopping, and the season's beauty, the young

Contessa Moretti-Caccia, a bride of a few months' standing.

"Giulio is coming for me," the Contessa Moretti-Caccia was saying to Donna Palmira, as Mrs. Roper and Bruce came in, "he is killing me with care! After all," she added, in her harsh Torino voice, and with a ravishing smile, I'm *not* the first woman who ever had a baby!"

Milly Roper blushed a deep, ugly red and turned sharply away, embarrassed to the quick. To her the speech was an unpardonable one.

Donna Palmira cooed with sympathy and delight, and the Scottish girls began talking very loudly about somebody's golf handicap.

Nino Gamba's face had whitened slowly, and he breathed through distended nostrils, as he looked away from Sappho.

"Isn't it beautiful," murmured Donna Palmira to Sir Bartle, "to meet a so natural young wife?"

Sir Bartle did not think that babies could with decency be referred to within at least three months of their birth, so he only grunted and thanked God under his breath when Giulio Moretti-Caccia came pattering up the long room on his high heels.

"*Gemma*," he murmured, kissing his wife's hands, "you are not tired, my soul? You have no headache?"

"No, caro," she answered, looking down at him, "I am still alive and well, and very hungry."

An hour later, as Mrs. Roper sat by her fire while her little maid set the table for her solitary dinner, Gamba came in.

He was very pale still, and was breathing hard.

Mrs. Roper dismissed Carolina, and told him to sit down.

"Mamma," he burst out, "I can't bear it. I have tried and tried, and everyone either pities or—laughs at me. You must persuade her to see Lemmi."

Mrs. Roper poked the fire gently. "I think you are very silly, you know," she declared at last, looking up at him, her eyes full of kindness.

"I am not silly. That ass of a Giulio Moretti-Caccia has been married three months and—you heard his wife?"

"Yes. I thought it vulgar," she answered quietly.

Gamba stared. Who could ever tell, he thought, what Americans would consider vulgar!

"Holy saints!" he exclaimed. "Since when is it vulgar to have a son?"

"It's vulgar to discuss such things before strangers. And you are getting positively hysterical about the matter, Nino."

"Donna Palmira says——"

"Oh, *drat* Donna Palmira! If that hydrocephalous monster of a child is the best her son can do, they'd have been better off with no child at all!"

"My mother is with Sappho now," he said, after a moody pause. "And I came to *implore* you to help me. And all you can say is to abuse Valerio Sacchetti's hair!"

Mrs. Roper sat up very straight and took her courage in both hands. It was extremely difficult for her to say what she had made up her mind to say, but after a moment she drew a deep breath and began.

"Listen to me, Nino. My husband's people all have big families; so have mine; my two first babies died, but—I had three in four years. Therefore there is no reason

why Sappho should not have children. Now what about you? You and your little sister were your father's and mother's only children, yet they were married for years. Your uncle—I know he's not married, but—has he any children?"

"I never heard of any," Nino answered sullenly.

"Well—and—you?" she went on, flushed and miserable, but resolute, "have you any?"

"Sacramento, *no!*" he shouted furiously, jumping to his feet. "What a question to ask the man who married your daughter less than two years ago. Jesus, Mary and Joseph!"

"You mustn't think I *enjoyed* asking you, you idiot," she snapped, her nerves a-jangle, "I *had* to. Well, you've been a man about town for years, you are thirty-two years old; surely you don't expect me to think you were a monk till you married? And if you had no children then, how dare you make my daughter miserable by blaming her for what very possibly is your own fault!"

Never in all her wandering, ill-regarded, unprotected life had she spoken so plainly. Neither had anyone ever spoken so plainly to Gamba. He was aghast, embarrassed, furious.

Other countries, other manners, indeed!

Without a word he rushed out of the room, and Mrs. Roper locked herself into her bedroom and cried for fifteen minutes.

Three days later, an Englishman, long a resident of Naples, and a member of the best clubs, told Bruce that Nino Gamba was gambling.

It appeared that for the past six weeks he had been

playing, but the last two nights, Colonel Blunt said, he had played and lost very heavily.

Bruce walked slowly home through a cold rain that he did not notice, and after an hour's thought went up to Mrs. Roper's room and told her what he had heard.

"If my uncle had been well I'd not have troubled you," he said, noticing how very pretty she looked in the firelight, "but the poor old fellow gets so horribly excited that I dreaded upsetting him."

"Yes. Quite right," she answered absently. "You're quite sure it's true?"

"Quite. Colonel Blunt is a perfectly reliable man and he told me out of a sense of duty. He was very intimate with Nino's father. What can we do about it? You know, I dare say, that it's in the blood."

She made a contemptuous face. "Yes. Ugh! How I despise people who have things in their blood. Thank God, I'm an American and *haven't* any blood."

"That's all very well, but as a matter of fact, disregarding hereditary taints does no good," he answered soberly. "Look at old Don Ottavio. He began by playing at the same club."

After a while he asked what she thought they had better do. "Shall you tell Donna Laura?"

She winced. "Ah, no, poor woman. She could not stop it, and it would break her heart. Wait a minute." After a pause she rose. "I *think*," she said, an odd quiver in her delicate lips, "I think I know something that may—be useful—will you wait here?"

He nodded, and she went swiftly to Sappho's bedroom. The girl was lying on the sofa in the firelight, one hand under her cheek.

"Sappho," her mother began at once without preamble, and almost harshly, "Nino is gambling. Gambling is in the family. And if he keeps on he'll end like Don Ottavio."

"*Mother!*" Sappho sat up, her face very white.

"Yes. It's quite true. An old Colonel Blunt told Mr. Bruce, and Mr. Bruce told me. Now listen," she went on, still in the curiously hard voice with which she had begun, "there is only one thing that will save him. I think you could tell him that one thing, if you weren't obstinate."

"I don't know what you mean," the girl cried, opening her eyes immensely wide.

"Yes you do, Sappho Roper, you know perfectly well what I mean. I won't say a word about your not telling me but—if you want to save your husband from ruin you'd better swallow your silly pride and tell him at once."

There was a long pause, and then Sappho said, half-sullen, half-shy: "I've only known myself a little while."

"H'm! Well, I've known since just after Christmas, and this is January 30."

"He—he was so *horrid* to me—I just thought I'd wait a while."

"And I suppose *I* was horrid to you, too!"

There was a break in Mrs. Roper's voice, for she had been, and was, seriously grieved and hurt by her daughter keeping her secret for so long, but before anything more could be said Nino came into the room, switching on the light at the door.

Mrs. Roper bowed to him and hurried downstairs, and

Sappho, very pale, very dignified, said gently to her husband: "Nino, if all goes well I am to have a baby in September. . . ."

CHAPTER V

DONNA LAURA's joy over the news was to Mrs. Roper full of pathos. The old woman's face seemed in an odd way to have thawed a little, her granite eyes held a faint glow, and her mouth from time to time trembled for a second, so that she had to cover it with one of her big hands.

The two mothers-in-law met, for the first time since the announcement, the next morning in Sappho's room. The young woman was still in bed, and her husband sat beside her, his beautiful face fatuous with the extraordinary and rather pathetically ridiculous pride common to young husbands on such occasions.

"Sure you are not feverish, angel?" he asked, anxiously, feeling her cheek with the back of his hand.

"Nonsense, Nino," Mrs. Roper broke in briskly. "She's to get up and come for a walk with me at once. And to-night we are going to see Duse in 'La Locandiera'!"

Sappho's happy eyes hung on her husband's. "Darling," she murmured, "a walk will really do me good, but I won't go to the theatre unless you want me to——"

"My soul!" he answered, and as he spoke Donna Laura came in. She swept, with her awkward dignity, past Mrs. Roper, pushed her son aside and kneeling by the bed, took Sappho for the first time in her life in her arms.

"I have prayed for it," she said jerkily, "prayed—days and nights—and Our Lady of Sorrows has heard my prayers."

There was such passion in her voice and being that the two Americans felt embarrassed, but Nino obviously regarded his mother's manner as perfect for so great an occasion, and kissed her hand respectfully as she rose.

"My son! My beloved son," she went on, crossing him solemnly, "I knew that you would not fail in your duty to your name."

Milly Roper turned abruptly to the window to hide an absolutely irrepressible smile. They had blamed Sappho for *not* having a child, and now that she was to have one they gave all the credit of it to Nino!

Then Donna Laura solemnly unhooked from her withered ears the very large, very dirty solitaire diamonds without which her son could not remember ever having seen her, and laid them in Sappho's hand.

"They are all I have left," she said, "and they must be yours now."

Milly was touched, but longed to ask Donna Laura why she did not decorate the ears of her doughty son with the jewels.

The longer she lived among Italians the less she understood them, and the more abundantly American she grew to feel herself.

Sappho, however, grew more and more Italian as time went on. She even accepted with perfect ease the, to her mother, so curiously premature congratulations on the approaching event.

That very first day Donna Laura's old butler tottered in and extended his rather lengthy congratulations; Eugenio, the cook, in a clean paper cap and a fresh apron, did the same; Marietta wept over Sappho's hand and

talked about "him" until even Sappho wondered how they could all be so sure the poor little thing wouldn't be a girl.

Then came Don Gaetano Poggi, the old priest, who had baptized and given Sappho her first communion, and he had a great deal to say about the destiny of the young heir, and during the following week nearly all the young woman's Italian acquaintances called to express their delight on her approaching motherhood. The little Contessa Moretti-Caccia came, full of wisdom and advice, and immeasurable superiority, for was not her baby due a full two months before Sappho's?

"You must call me Gemma, and I will call you Sappho," the pretty creature gushed, "for they are sure to be great friends. Who knows, yours may be a girl and our boy fall in love with her!"

Donna Laura, who was, as was now usual with her, installed with a large basket of white work in a corner of Sappho's salotto, looked up quickly. "My son's baby is to be a boy," she said resolutely, and while Mrs. Roper who was knitting by the window smiled to herself, Sappho did not; it no longer seemed odd to her, as it had done ten days ago, this conviction that Nino's baby would be a boy.

"I'm delighted, my dear," Donna Palmira said, rubbing Sappho's soft cheek with her bristly one, "but you've wasted precious time. If you'd taken my advice and gone to Lemmi——"

All Naples knew that the young Gamba were going to have a baby, and all Naples congratulated Nino as if he had achieved something hitherto unheard of.

One day Marietta came into Mrs. Roper's salottino where Sappho was sitting with her mother, to say that

Jeanne Prou was in the passage and would like to be allowed to congratulate la Signora Marchesa.

The girl came in rather shyly, a little bunch of Parma violets in her hand.

"Madame la Marquise will forgive me," she said, "but I heard the news through Madame la Comtesse's cook who knows Eugenio——"

Sappho shook hands with her and so did Mrs. Roper, and when she had expressed her congratulations on the great happening, they asked about her new situation.

"Ma foi, madame," Jeanne shrugged her shoulders, "the signora contessa is very nice, but—she is not a lady for a girl to grow attached to." Her eyes glowed as she watched Sappho, and Milly knew that the glow came from real love.

"You look a little pale, Jeanne," Sappho said.

"I am not very well. I do not like garlic and our chef puts it in everything—I think I shall not stay long in Naples. If—if I could have stayed with Madame la Marquise," she added, her eyes still so oddly tender as they rested on Sappho's quiet face, "it would have been different."

The two women had always liked the girl, and now Mrs. Roper suggested to her that as Sir Bartle's leg was really mending well, and he hoped to get away in four or five weeks, Jeanne might consider coming back to her daughter. "Carmela is a nice girl," she added, "but not nearly such a good maid as you, Jeanne——"

But Jeanne, though she flushed with pleasure at the suggestion, shook her head. "A thousand thanks, madame, but—the mill wheel never churns the same water twice. No. After all, France is my country, and I should like

to go for a while at least to my old home, Nogent-sur-Seine——”

As she left, Nino came in and sat down, apparently what his mother and wife called nervous, and his mother-in-law “peevish.”

“What was Jeanne doing here,” he asked; “trying to get a glimpse of Domenico, I suppose? Well, she may as well give *that* up. He’s leaving Sir Bartle next week, and going back to Pisa.”

“Good gracious, why?” Mrs. Roper asked. “Poor Sir Bartle is so used to him.”

“I don’t know why. I stepped in to say *buon giorno* to Sir Bartle just now, and he told me. Bruce is cabling to England to a kind of courier-valet he knows, to come out at once.”

Sappho shook her head. “It’s a pity; he’s such a good servant.”

“A good deal changed of late, though, Sir Bartle says, dear,” said her mother. “Sir Bartle was telling me last night. It seems he’s grown very surly and unpleasant.”

“Is breakfast ready?” broke in Nino. “I am as hungry as a wolf. I do hope the new chef will be able to make a decent *frittura*, Sappho.”

Bruce was not precisely unhappy in his hopeless love for Sappho Gamba. In the first place, he had for many years been hopelessly in love with another woman, and was more or less used to the situation, and secondly, his love was an unselfish one, and he sincerely rejoiced in Sappho’s happiness, though he was, in spite of being a just man, quite unable to see how she could love an empty-headed barber’s block like Nino Gamba.

Mrs. Roper could have told him how it was, but she

would have died rather than let any human being know what she knew about her daughter's intellect.

She adored her daughter, but she saw her with the queer sharp-sightedness that some mothers have for their children; she knew that Sappho's goodness, truth and purity were as rare (to use her expression) as hen's teeth, but as has been said, she also knew how strictly limited the girl's intelligence was.

Sappho read books that bored her mother to death; she read "Marcus Aurelius," "The Road Mender," "Daily Thoughts for Daily Needs," and Emerson. She read these books, but she did not digest them; not one word of their beauty and wisdom ever became a part of herself.

Sappho was kind; she rarely blamed anyone for anything, but this broad-mindedness came largely from her torpid imagination.

Milly Roper had had hundreds of friends whom she had warmly loved, for whom she had done much and whom, as time went on, she had lost sight of; but at suddenly meeting one of these half-forgotten people out of her past her heart would beat hard, and her cheeks flush with pleasure, and to her, at least, time was annihilated and all the old interest again throbbing with life.

She had been "in love" in her way, three or four times, and laughed, and suffered, and forgotten....

Sappho, on the contrary, had never made friends. She had, to her mother's disappointment, never attracted men, and Mrs. Roper's disappointment was not without logic, for in all women who do not attract men there is a cold streak—an arid spot.

But she knew that for her, and her husband, Sappho's love went to the very roots of her soul. The girl could

see no fault in her mother, she could see no fault in her husband, she would see no faults in her child. And she would, her mother was sure, go to her grave with no more than those three people in her life, unless she had another child.

While Donna Laura regarded her friendships with San Gervasio, Captain Mola and a pallid, hungry, very gifted young sculptor, as profoundly immoral, Milly Roper was doing a good deal of rather profound thinking.

It occurred to her that characters grow and ripen in a certain amount of trouble as well as in the sunshine of happiness, and she often lay awake wondering whether a glimpse of human imperfection in her demi-god Nino might not prove, in the end, good for Sappho. Suppose he ever gambled again and Milly found it out, should she, or should she not (of course after the baby's birth) tell her daughter?

Or suppose a little bout of unfaithfulness? Very tranquilly the little woman faced these possibilities. She personally had never known a man as to whose rigorous faithfulness to his wife after three years' married life she would have been willing to swear—

And she had learned from Giorgio di San Gervasio that in the matter of women Nino's pre-nuptial life had been rather brilliantly variegated—

Very often, after observing during the day Sappho's blind subjection to Nino, Milly would lie awake for hours, wondering—

But Bruce, who lingered on and on in Naples with his uncle, admired Sappho more and more from day to day.

He adored her Madonna-like beauty, and the characteristic stillness with which she could sit by the fire brooding over her happiness. He saw the clarity of her lovely eyes; he did not see their lack of thought.

He saw and admired the whole-heartedness of her love for Nino and her mother, but his eyes were blind to her lack of power to love anyone else.

One evening he came to Mrs. Roper's salottino rather late, and sat down by the fire with his well-shaped brown hands hanging limp between his knees.

She liked him, and was growing to understand him, despite what she called his Englishness. Like all women who have been much loved she had learned how to treat men, so she did not speak, but went quietly on with her knitting.

"Mrs. Roper," he began slowly at last, "I've something to tell you, and I don't quite know how to do it."

She glanced up, her beautiful little face looking not more than five-and-twenty in the soft light, and smiled, the quick, unrestrained smile of the woman with no secrets about her teeth. "Nino been gambling again?"

He stared at her, his big, round glasses shining in the firelight. "By Jove! how did you guess?"

"I don't know. It's not unexpected. You see, I felt in my bones he'd go on as he'd begun, and—of course, I knew it was something that affected Sappho."

She spoke so simply, her eyes busy with her work, that he could say nothing, and after a moment he went on. "It's *chemin de fer* at the club. He lost a good deal last week, and Colonel Blunt, who, as I told you, was a great friend of his father's, came to see me this afternoon

and told me. He regards Nino as a mere child, you see——”

“I see. And so he is a mere child. What are you going to do about it?”

“That’s what I want to talk over with you—Blunt wants me to tackle Nino, but I can’t see that that would do any good.”

“No—no, *that* wouldn’t help.”

“Damn him,” Bruce growled, “he might run straight now. No excuse for him, and if it goes on, Sappho will have to know, and it would kill her.”

“She mustn’t know, whatever happens,” her mother said firmly, “till after September.”

Bruce was surprised. “And then? After September, I mean? Surely you wouldn’t let her know then, either?”

“I—I’m not sure, Mr. Bruce. I’ve been thinking a good deal about it lately, and I wonder whether it would not really be better to let her—see him as he really is. He’s not bad, and there’s nothing so very horrible about a little gambling, and I’m not at all sure it’s good for her to be—so sheltered.”

For a wild moment Bruce wondered if what he had so often read and heard of had come to pass in this most devoted of mothers. Could Mrs. Roper be growing jealous of her daughter’s youth? One look at her face restored his balance. “Why shouldn’t she be sheltered? Being sheltered, to her, means being happy,” he said slowly.

“I know, I know. Oh, I don’t suppose I *could* ever make up my mind to destroy her faith in him, but—faith as exaggerated as hers approaches idolatry, almost. Some-

times I feel that she's like a goldfish in a globe of water. Of course you won't know what I mean!"

She broke off with a laugh, and they fell to discussing what was to be done about Nino. At last Mrs. Roper undertook to speak to him herself, and the next day she did so.

Her attempt was a complete failure, for while the young man at once acknowledged that he had been gambling and losing, he declared that it had happened not out of a passion for play, but out of sheer boredom, and that he had no intention of gambling again.

"All my life I've gone somewhere at night," he said. "You know our Neapolitan way—from salon to salon, for an hour to this ball, for an hour to that—and now that Sappho is not well, and I stay in so much with her, I get bored."

There was something almost touching in the simplicity with which he confessed to his mother-in-law that evenings at home with his wife bored him. Milly laughed. "Che birbone," she said, "what a scamp you are, Nino. I suppose you think Sappho is never bored all alone with *you*?"

"I know she isn't," he answered with conviction. "That's the difference between her and me."

He was right. Sappho, like the goldfish, moved slowly about in her congenial medium with perfect content. Sir Bartle and she had become great friends. That is to say, the old man had become very fond of the beautiful young creature, and was as fussy with her as a cat with an adopted squirrel. He regarded the coming baby as a kind of spiritual grandson, and would sit by the fire by the hour planning for the child's future, while Sappho

sewed flimsy and delicate garments, over which Donna Laura shook her head in horror.

"He *must* go to an English school, my dear, you know. We can't have him grow up like that frightful Sacchetti child. I'll put him down for Harrow at once. Nino will love England because of the hunting, and you'll all come to Great Roding every summer, anyhow. We'll have him on a pony by the time he's two years old—can't begin too young."

"Oh, Sir Bartle," Sappho protested gently, "I do *really* think two is too young. Why, he'll hardly be out of frocks by then!"

"Rubbish, my dear. He'll be in knickers when he's eighteen months old, and a fine little fellow he'll be, too. Ah, Sappho," the old man broke off with a sigh, "if only your poor aunt could have seen him!"

He had grown very old since his accident, as old people do; his belated spurt of youth had been unable to resist a broken bone, and all his interest in Mrs. Roper had transferred itself to her daughter, and still more to the coming child. Sappho thought that sometimes he really believed her baby was to be his grandchild, but she was not sure.

The days and weeks passed slowly, quietly, as if under some charm, and every day the old man and the young woman talked and planned about the little Giovanni Bartolommeo, as he was to be called, or, as Nino called him, Gianbartolo.

Donna Laura prayed much, and made queer, stiff little shifts, and miles of stony swaddling clothes; Mrs. Roper knitted and made gossamer-like frocks and petticoats, took Sappho for walks, read to her, rubbed her feet when she

was restless, and prevented Nino from going out in the evenings as much as he wished to do.

"No, you are *not* going out to-night," the little woman used to say, looking resolutely up into his eyes. "You are going to stay at home and sing to Sappho and read to her."

"But—"

"Oh, shut up, Nino," she would snap in American. "Why on earth *should* you go out when she is ill and nervous with *your* baby?"

And Nino would stay at home and be charming the rest of the evening. There was no rancour in him.

Donna Laura would sit quietly in her corner, her eyes fixed on her son's face. It was plain that he seemed to her more of an angel than ever during those quiet evenings.

"How good he is," she said once to Mrs. Roper, as the two young people sat at the piano; "how kind, to stay at home in the evenings!"

Mrs. Roper knew a rather common Italian word for "rubbish," and she said it now. "Why *shouldn't* he stay at home, I'd just like to know? *She* stays at home, doesn't *she*?"

"Cara Signora," answered Donna Laura with dignity, "she is a woman."

Mrs. Roper could have boxed her large, pale ears.

But one evening Donna Laura knocked at Sir Bartle's door, and when he called out "Come in," and she opened the door, he hardly knew her, so dreadful was the look on her face.

"Good God! Donna Laura," he cried half rising, and

wrenching his knee in his agitation. "What's the matter? Sappho, is it——"

Donna Laura sat down very stiffly on the edge of a chair and folded her hands.

"Sappho is well," she said. "It's Nino. He has gambled and lost ten thousand lire at the club."

Sir Bartle stared. "God bless my soul!" he said. "He mustn't do that."

"His father gambled; his grandfather gambled; they all gamble."

An idiotic phrase sprang into Sir Bartle's brain so suddenly that he nearly laughed. "All Gambas gamble; all gamblers Gamba."

Then another thought quenched this one. The boy! The boy must not gamble!

"We'll send him to school in England, that's what we'll do. To a prep. for Harrow, that's what we'll do," the old man mumbled vaguely.

Donna Laura looked at him with eyes like dead eyes. "If there's a scandal it will kill Sappho," she said, "and that will kill *him*, too, the child."

They gazed at each other for several seconds. They were unlike in every possible way, and yet for some reason they had trusted each other from the first. He had brought happiness for her son because she asked him to do so; now they found themselves allies on behalf of the child that was coming.

"You send him to me," Sir Bartle said, after the pause. "We can't have that boy grow up a gambler, blood or no blood—you go and send Nino to me."

Nino Gamba had a bad half-hour with the old English-

man, who could understand sin but despised weakness.

When, finally, he left Sir Bartle he had a cheque for ten thousand lire in his pocket, and in Sir Bartle's dispatch-box lay two formally written papers, signed by Gamba and witnessed by Samuel Parker, Sir Bartle's courier valet; one to the effect that the young Giovanni Bartolomeo Gamba was to be educated in England, at his godfather, Sir Bartle Sandys's expense; the other being the Marchese Giovanni Gamba's solemn promise not to touch cards, or play any game of chance for the period of one year.

It was moonlight that night, and all the night through Donna Laura Gamba lay at the foot of the altar in her chapel, praying, with her face pressed to the hardly colder stone floor.

CHAPTER VI

THE winter ran so far into the spring that year that the Gambas did not move out to Posilippo until mid-May.

In March the raging winds had given way to steady, almost unbroken rains, and Sappho, who, by now, felt wretchedly ill, and was extremely nervous, was loath to leave the comfort of her well-warmed, well-heated apartment.

"The villa is always damp, even in dry weather," she said over and over again when Nino tried to persuade her to make the change, "and it would be unbearable now."

Rather to her surprise Donna Laura agreed with her in this matter, so, though Nino rode out occasionally, and reported everything dry and in good order, the move was still put off from week to week.

Sir Bartle had not told Bruce or anyone else of his transaction with Nino, but Mrs. Roper knew through Bruce of the young man's losses, and the unexpectedly prompt settlement of his debts. "Colonel Blunt says old Don Ottavio says my uncle gave him the money, but even if it's true, how should he know?"

Milly thought for a moment. "I don't know, but he's a loathsome old man. I wouldn't put listening at doors past him! I met him creeping upstairs the other night like a dirty old spook, and he nearly scared me to death."

"You're not really frightened of him?" Bruce asked idly.

She laughed. "Oh, you English! No, I am not frigh-

tened *by* him ('to frighten,' transitive verb), nor am I afraid *of* him ('to be afraid *of*,' intransitive verb), but he's horrid, and I wish he didn't live under the same roof with us."

She had of late seen less of Bruce than usual, for Sappho's condition demanded much quiet, and she spent hours every day in her daughter's bedroom, shut away from everyone. Sappho, although she, of course, knew nothing of the gambling, was not easy in her mind. It was as if some disquieting instinct were haunting her.

She would lie by the hour staring into the fire, hardly speaking and then suddenly burst out into some most un-Sappho-like fretting.

"Suppose my baby should die, mother?" she would say. "I shouldn't mind if I died too, but suppose *he* died, and I—I stayed?"

"Suppose the moon was made of green cheese, goose! Shall we go on with 'The Small House'?"

"No, darling mother; if I died do you suppose Nino would marry again?"

"A very poor compliment to you if *he didn't*," Mrs. Roper answered, heartsick but jocular. "Don't be silly, or the baby will be an idiot!"

"Am I so silly, dear? Perhaps I am," the girl went on dreamily. "You see it's because I only love Nino, and you, and the baby."

"Also a great mistake, dear. The more you love the more you *can* love. You can teach yourself to like people just as you can to like olives, or oysters, or caviare——"

Sappho laughed. "You see, you were *born* liking olives, and oysters, and caviare, motherling! You never had to learn!"

"Well, now, to be candid, I don't suppose I ever did, but at the same time it is unwise to confine your affections to three people—even such gems of the human race as Nino and I and the baby!"

Sappho drew her shawl more closely round her shoulders. "That's just it, I am spoilt! I have *the* perfect mother, *the* perfect husband, and I'm going to have the perfect baby! What more could I possibly want?"

"*H'm!*"

They laughed, but each knew that the other had been more than half serious in her remarks, and such talks happened over and over again during those long weeks of chilly rain.

In late April Sir Bartle and the capable Parker went to Sicily, where Bruce, who was busy with a portrait of Sappho, was to join them in a fortnight's time, and whence they were all to come to Posilippo, where Sir Bartle, who had taken a villa for June, would join them.

"I can't bear to be long away from Sappho, that's the truth, *Milly*," the old man declared the night before he left. "She's like a real daughter to me, and, by Jove! I couldn't be more interested in that boy if he really *was* my grandson!"

But it was to Donna Laura that he confided his great plan. Shortly before her death Lady Sandys had inherited a large fortune from her brother, who had settled in South America in her childhood, and this fortune, amounting to some £10,000 a year, the old man had decided to settle, immediately after its birth, on Sappho's child.

"Of course he *is* going to be a boy," he explained; "we all know that; just in case he is a girl, we must get

the name right in my will! Her name, of course, would be Violet, don't you think so?"

Donna Laura did think so. Her piety was a very rich and vital thing, but her love of money was only second to it, and even though the immense income of two hundred and fifty thousand lire would be not her son's, but her son's child's, she knew Sir Bartle well enough to be sure that he would never insult Nino by any clause depriving him of the administration of the money during the child's minority. And what could Nino not do for the family's glory with all that money! Donna Laura lay awake at night planning the restoration of the palace, the purchase of suitably splendid art treasures to enrich it, a judicious selection of at once to be entailed jewels.

Then the villa. It, too, must be brought to a state of perfection, and there would be servants, magnificent lacqueys, and carriages, and motor-cars. Apes, and ivory, and peacocks!

Not one thing did Donna Laura think of for herself; her personal unselfishness was as great as her family selfishness was ruthless. Her dream was the restoration and enhanced glories of the House, and her dreams had no end. Nino would never gamble again, that was understood; he had, of course, rigidly kept his promise, and Sir Bartle had only to bind him for the future by an extension of that promise.

In May the weather changed, the sun came out, and poor, drowned Naples came to life again. On the eighteenth, the portrait having come to a standstill, and Bruce gone to Girgenti some time before, the Gambas and Mrs. Roper drove out to the shabby old salmon-pink villa in the neglected garden near the sea, at Posillipo.

They all liked the house, with its vast, half-dark rooms and the atrocious freschi on the ceilings; they liked the great trees, the moss-grown terrace, the fat-bellied cherubs in the choked-up fountain; and, all day, all night, the hollow sound of the waves. . . .

On the first of June Mrs. Roper broke a tooth on a bit of nougat, and went to town to have it seen to. It was a glorious day, very warm, but swept by a friendly, cool wind, and the blaze of the sky was softened by great balls of woolly cloud that every now and then hid the sun for a minute.

Mrs. Roper found her dentist drinking lemon squash and fanning himself with a palm-leaf fan.

“Oh, dear,” he groaned in the voice and accent of the middle-west of their country. “*You would* blow in just when I thought every patient I had was dead! What’s wrong with your little cracker-crackers?”

There was not much wrong, and he soon set it right, and she went out into the sun with something of the shrinking of one stepping into a very hot bath, for the wind had dropped.

“My,” she said to herself, “it’s a scorcher!”

Since she had not to provide for Sappho, or pay rent for her rooms, the little woman felt herself to be comparatively rich, and now looked about for a botta to drive her back to Posilippo. Not a cab in sight!

She walked very slowly along in the lee of some tall houses, and crossed into a little piazza, beyond which lay a short cut to an important street where she would be sure to find a cab.

The piazza was empty, except for a woman who was

walking just in front of her, walking slowly, heavily, with a curious waddling gait.

"Poor thing!" Mrs. Roper thought. *"I am glad Sappho's out of this heat."*

Then as she was about to pass the woman whose bearing had reminded her of her daughter, she stopped short. *"Why, Jeanne,"* she cried, *"it's you!"*

Jeanne stared dully at her. *"Oui, madame, c'est moi."*

Mrs. Roper had blushed very red. *"Jeanne, Jeanne, why didn't you tell me? I'd have told Sir Bartle, and he'd have made him marry you."*

The girl shrugged her shoulders. *"Que voulez-vous, madame? Who can make a man marry a girl who has"* —then she used the pathetic expressive word of her nation and her class—*"faulted?"*

"But—it's perfectly outrageous! I never heard of such a thing in my life. The hypocrite! He has left Sir Bartle, you know, and gone back to Tuscany. We wondered why he went. Now we know. But come with me," she went on, beckoning to a little victoria with a red and white awning over it. *"You must tell me all about it, and I will see how we can help you."*

When she had got into the carriage Jeanne sank into her corner and burst into tears.

"Madame was always kind to me," she cried, *"and Madame la Marquise. I would never have told, never, to distress these ladies—"*

"But how silly! Tell me all about it. First, when is your baby coming?"

Jeanne cried on. *"In August—in September—ah, madame, I should have made him a good wife, b'en que j'avais fauté! Indeed I should."*

"Of course you would. You needn't tell me. The man's a fool as well as a scoundrel. Has he sent you any money?"

"Yes. He has sent me five hundred lire, and will pay the midwife."

"Well, that's something. Have you his address?"

The girl shook her head. "Non, madame. The money came from Florence, but—there was no letter, and no address. Madame—Madame la Marquise, comment se trouve-t-elle?"

Mrs. Roper took her to a little café and gave her chocolate and cakes, and told her all the Gamba news. It seemed to her extremely touching that the fates of these two girls, her daughter's and her daughter's former maid, should be at once so alike and so different.

Nino was reading poetry that afternoon to Sappho in the garden, adoring and caring for her—for in spite of his occasional restlessness and selfishness she knew that there could be no possible doubt of his love—and this poor Jeanne, she thought, whose sin had lain in trusting a man who had over and over again begged her to marry him, was here alone, a stranger in a strange country, ill and deserted.

All her way home in the little jingling victoria Milly Roper turned these things over in her mind. and pondered them.

She had written Jeanne's address, "Signora Jeanne Prou," in her little note-book, and promised to go soon to see her. The girl did not look well, and when Sir Bartle came back in a fortnight's time she would tell him the story, and ask him to give her money to send the girl to a cooler place. "I wonder if he had better

force the man to marry her and legitimatize his child?" she wondered. "Anyhow, I'll tell him."

But before Sir Bartle came back July had begun, and the dreadful thing had happened.

It had been a bad day, for in the morning the doctor had, after carefully examining Sappho, told her mother in private that he was not satisfied with his patient's condition.

"Of course," he said, hesitating a little, "you know that her heart is—not quite right?"

"My God, no!"

"You should have been told that. It need not prove very serious, but—with a first baby, and in her general condition—"

"Dottor Avellini," Mrs. Roper said quietly, "please tell me the whole—the worst danger."

And he did. He told her honestly that Sappho must be kept perfectly quiet, in absolute peace of mind, that nothing must be allowed to upset her. "In short, signora," he finished, wondering if all the stories he had heard about Mrs. Roper were true, "if your daughter wants the moon, you must do your best to unhook it for her. And above all," he added, at the door, drawing on his gloves, "keep her from brooding. She is extremely nervous and a little morbid. *She must not become melancholy.*"

That afternoon had been a dreadful one to Mrs. Roper, but at last it ended, and at about eleven she went to bed, and was already asleep when Carolina, her little maid, roused her to say that Piccoletti, the chemist, had come to say that someone in Naples must speak to Mrs. Roper on his telephone at once.

Mrs. Roper dressed hurriedly and ran through the

upper garden and along the dripping, dark streets, old Piccoletti wheezing like a damaged harmonium behind her. He did not know who the gentleman at the telephone was, but it war a foreign gentleman, and he had said that the signora marchesa was on *no* account to be wakened or the *old* signora marchesa.

"That wretched boy has been gambling again," Mrs. Roper said to herself, with angry red cheeks and tight lips. "*My!* won't I give it to him!"

Never was she to forget the dim little shop, with its smell of rhubarb, and soap, and a hundred faded drugs. The clock struck twelve as she took up the receiver of the telephone, and she had to wait until it ceased before she could speak. "Little *beast*," she thought, "*won't* I give it to you!"

And then she heard a voice, a strange, an English voice. "Are you Mrs. Roper? Are you alone? I mean, neither your daughter nor Donna Laura is with you?"

"I am alone in a shop. Please tell me who you are and what the matter is?"

"My name is David Blunt," said the voice, "and I regret to say I have very bad news for you—your son-in-law, Gamba, is—very ill."

"You mean he is dead?"

"Yes, I was with him two minutes before it happened, and—but can you get some sort of a carriage and come at once to the palace—the Gamba palace? I—I thought it best to have him taken in there—it happened just outside."

Old Don Alfiero Piccoletti, sapless and dry as one of his bunches of herbs, managed to procure an ancient musty brougham, and before she got into it, gave Mrs.

Roper a dose of sal volatile, which she did not at all need.

"You will go to the villa and tell Carolina to go to bed without a word to anyone. I have gone to the palazzo on business, and will be back before the ladies are awake."

"Si signora, si signora," the old man repeated, "do not fear, I will make no mistakes, . . ."

The bony horses clattered down the street, and Milly Roper sat with clenched hands and a burning face, repeating over and over aloud to herself, "Nino is dead. Nino is dead. Nino is dead."

She was never to forget the endless drive that nevertheless ended; or climbing the endless stairs to Sir Bartle's salotto, or meeting the little pink old Englishman with a dyed moustache and snowy hair. "Colonel Blunt. Er—will you come in here—we have put the—er—poor Gamba, on the bed in the next room, . . ."

On the bed in Sir Bartle's room, then; that is where Nino, that queer, new, dead Nino was lying.

"Yes, you had better tell me about it," she heard herself saying, quite intelligently, and then she was able quite easily to listen and to seize it all.

"We had been playing bridge at the club, and Gamba who had not played any game for some time, came in at about half-past ten and sat watching us for awhile," the old man began. I noticed that he was pale and that his hand was bound up.

"He seemed excited, and rather to my surprise ordered a bottle of champagne and drank quite three-quarters of it very quickly. At eleven I left, and at the door he joined me. He is—er—was—very abstemious like most of these Italians, and I saw the wine had gone to his head a little. As we reached the Corso he told me quite

suddenly that he'd knocked a man down an hour before and put his thumb out and had some chemist see to it. I asked him who the man was, and he said he was a Greek who had tried to blackmail him about—about a little gambling he had done a while ago. I gathered the feller'd threatened to tell the marchesa—your daughter—unless he stumped up. So he quite rightly knocked him down. I live in the Piazza Santa Cristina, so we parted at the corner of the palace here, and he went on to telephone for a car from the porter's lodge, as he wanted to run out to Posilippo. He was anxious to get home to his wife."

The old man cleared his throat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. "A minute later I heard a cry and a stumble, and rushed back—and—er—well, he was lying there quite dead, doubled up, and with a small spot of blood no bigger than a sixpence on his shirt front."

"And—the man—the Greek?"

"Clean away. I never even caught sight of him, though I heard his footsteps for some time. My dear lady, it's—it's a most distressing business, ain't it?"

Mrs. Roper went to her own room, found a bottle of Marsala, of which the fastidious old viveur drank thirstily, and some stale biscuits that she in vain tried to eat, and for two hours they sat in the vast, shrouded drawing-room, planning how best to defeat the law and conceal the fact that murder had been done. "It would kill my daughter and her child," Mrs. Roper said several times. "She is not well, and the doctor warned me only this morning that she must have no shock of any kind—and it would kill Donna Laura. The wound being so small,

and there being so little—blood—surely we can keep it a secret?"

"Criminal offence, you know," Colonel Blunt answered thoughtfully, "but—a scandal *could* do no good, and, as you say, your daughter's life is the first consideration. As for me—this poor lad's father was my dearest friend for twenty years, and there's very little I wouldn't do for his family's sake. But how can we manage?"

Like most desperate plans that succeed, theirs was quite simple. Colonel Blunt would go to a small villa he owned in a remote village the other side of the town, and from there wire in Nino's name that he and Blunt had motored out for the night, and Nino had sprained his ankle.

"The road is perfectly appalling, even Donna Laura could not attempt to get her there, and my caretaker is an old servant, who for the best of reasons will do whatever I tell him. I shall begin by telling him the truth, thus making an accomplice of him."

"But—Sappho will insist on telephoning."

"There is no telephone to the villa. He has been there before with me, poor lad, and the old marchesa will explain all that. No, it mustn't be his ankle, it must be his wrist, so I'll have to write for him."

"But in that case he'd come back—only a hurt wrist!"

"Damn. So he would. Wrist *and* ankle, then. Meantime, I'll write you privately that he's got a touch of fever, and—we'll have him get worse—see? This is Tuesday, then—well, on Friday he'll die suddenly of heart failure."

"Doctor's certificate?" Milly asked.

"H'm, yes. Fellow named Palma will do that. He is the village doctor there. Owes me money. I must

go out at once and fetch him. What about the feller downstairs? The old porter who helped me carry him up?"

"Oh, dear, yes! Aristide! However, he adores—*adored* Nino—oh, poor Nino," she began to cry softly, "I'll go and talk to him." . . .

Everything happened according to plan. Doctor Palma was venal and Colonel Blunt rich; the old porter was made to see that his beloved House of Gamba must be spared the horrors of an inquest, the caretaker at Covioli did what he was told on being promised five thousand lire if the story did not come out.

Best, but most tragic of all, Sappho herself was not well the next day, and believing every word her mother told her of the accident at Covioli, devoted herself with all her might to getting better so as not to frighten Nino on his return.

Until she dies Mrs. Roper will shrink in horror from the memory of those next few days. Every morning she went on some pretext into Naples and carried flowers into the death-room. Aristide had taken off and burnt the coat and shirt and vest, and the body lay in a new suit of pale blue pyjamas.

"Ah, signora, che bello, com' e bello, il mio marchesino!" The old porter wept a good deal, but he told no tales, and not a soul knew of the grim secret of the palace. He also prayed, and kept tall yellow candles burning by the dead man, and a crucifix on his breast.

On the Thursday morning Mrs. Roper asked Donna Laura to go to town with her, and on the way, in the

musty old brougham, told her the story from the beginning.

When she stopped speaking, Donna Laura said quietly, "You have acted for the honour of the family. I thank you.

She said no more, she did not faint, she did not weep, and yet when Milly Roper had closed the door on the old woman and her dead son she knew that she had been the witness of the actual breaking of a human heart.

CHAPTER VII

FOR over three weeks Sappho Gamba lay at the point of death. Sometimes her mother felt that the elaborate web of lies woven by herself and Colonel Blunt for the girl's safeguarding had been a waste of time.

"She could not have been worse if we'd told her the truth," she cried once, in despair, to Donna Laura, but Donna Laura shook her head. "She is alive," the old woman answered, "and if we had told her the truth she would be dead."

Mrs. Roper looked at her. *She* was not dead, for she still walked and spoke, and ate, but something in her eyes was dreadful to the little American. "You'd be better off, you poor thing, if it had killed you outright," she thought.

The news of Nino's illness had been broken very gradually and tenderly to Sappho, and she had taken it at first with a queer dulness. Then came Colonel Blunt's note to Mrs. Roper saying that in spite of every care, his dear young friend had died that morning, without pain, and Mrs. Roper had told her daughter this as well.

Sappho lay quiet for a while, her immense eyes staring up at the ceiling, the old man's note in her hand.

Then to her mother's horror she had laughed. "I'm sorry he's dead," she said, her mouth stretched oddly. "Nino liked him. I'll tell Nino when he comes——"

An hour later she was in a raging fever, and Doctor Avellini looked very grave as he left her room. "It is

most unfortunate," he said to Mrs. Roper, "that the poor signor marchese should have died just now."

"Yes, but my daughter—my daughter?"

"Her temperature is over forty, and as I told you I am not satisfied with her general condition, but—we will do our best. You must cut off her hair and keep the ice-bag on her head and give her the powders regularly. And"—he hesitated in the little way characteristic of him, though he knew no mental hesitation—"when the fever leaves her, do not be—*h'm*—alarmed, if—if she is not quite herself."

Mrs. Roper sat down suddenly on a carved chest near which, in the tiled hall, they were standing. "You don't mean that her *mind*—"

"I mean that very probably she may not be quite normal until after the birth of the child, but you must not let that alarm you unnecessarily. It is a more frequent thing than most people know, signora, and in this sad case it may be—*h'm*—simply a blessing of God in disguise."

Avellini was a convinced atheist, but phrases such as this he regarded as justifiable as a necessary dose of morphia. He went his way, portly, dandified, dressed, as always, all the year round, in perfectly fitting grey clothes, and decorated with a yellow carnation, his mind already occupied with the typhoid of the next patient on his morning's list.

Two nuns came the following day to help nurse Sappho, but by night or day either Donna Laura or Mrs. Roper was in her room as well.

Donna Laura was an unexpectedly good nurse, strong, gentle and deft, and even in her worst hours Sappho

knew her, though she sometimes failed to recognize her own mother.

The two nuns, Sister Deodata and Sister Anna, were capable and conscientious, but Mrs. Roper hated them both for their impersonal, mechanical way of carrying out their duties.

They also ate a great deal and drank immense quantities of milk at odd times, which innocent pleasures lashed Mrs. Roper into a furious disgust. She herself could not eat nor sleep, and grew thin and worn as the terrible, monotonous days and nights crawled past. Her delightful vigorous hair seemed to be less golden, less elastically curly, and over each ear white spirals suddenly appeared.

"You must eat, signora," the doctor told her, "or you will be ill. We are getting the fever down, the child, greatly to my relief, still lives, and in a few days, when your daughter's temperature is normal, she will need you more than anyone else."

Milly stood before him like a terrified child, her hands twisting together, her lips shaking. "And—her—her mind?"

"Avellini was touched. "Cara signora," he said gently, "no man on earth can tell you that yet. She may be perfectly normal, or her brain may have been shocked into temporary forgetfulness. If she were *my* daughter, I should hope for the latter condition, which, believe me, besides making her infinitely more happy, is not in the least unusual. In my personal experience alone, I have met with at least a dozen cases when a prospective mother has been, to the lay eye—the *lay* eye, observe—practically insane during the whole of her pregnancy."

"But—when the baby is born?"

"The shock and pain of the birth, and the restoration through it, of normal physical conditions, almost invariably restores the mental poise at once."

Mrs. Roper drew a deep breath. "*Almost* invariably."

"Yes. Your daughter is a sane and normal young woman, except for her slight heart defect. When she hears her baby crying, and takes it into her arms, I have not the slightest fear but that she will at once be her old self—though, mind you," he added briskly, looking at his watch, "we do not yet know that she will not be her old self from the minute her temperature drops to normal!"

Milly followed him to the door, and walked beside him down the path to the big wrought-iron gates beyond which his car was standing.

"Thank you, dottore," she said, "you have been very kind to me, and I know I am being tiresome. I am—very fond of my daughter, and—I'm sleeping badly. Just one more thing. Supposing that—the baby did not live?"

The car began to roar as she spoke, and Avellini held out his hand. "I am in a great hurry, Signora Roper," he said evasively; "as to the baby—I do not see why it should not live and be as fine a young man as was his father. The signore marchese was the handsomest young man I ever saw in my life. *Arrivederla, signora.*"

Mrs. Roper went slowly back to the house and out into the back loggia, where she stood for some time looking at the placid sea.

She could not go to the funeral, for it took place on one of Sappho's worst days, but she sent two wreaths, one from Sappho and one from herself.

Don Ottavio, who had been in Rome for some time

and had only just returned, fetched Donna Laura, who, to Milly's surprise, accepted his escort without protest, and brought her back. His nephew's death had plainly been a real shock to the disreputable old man, and his manner to Donna Laura seemed to Mrs. Roper to be hardly short of perfection.

To her, on his return, he expressed his regrets over Sappho's illness. "You don't think much of me," he said, with an inborn dignity that no rascality could entirely submerge, "and I don't blame you, but—I was fond of Nino, and he was the head of my family, and I know how deeply he loved his wife. She was always—very civil to me, too," he added with a queer humility. "I hope from the bottom of my heart, signora, that she will soon be well."

"Thank you," Mrs. Roper answered, rather touched, "it's kind of you, Don Ottavio. She is young, and the baby will console her. I think I am almost more sorry for poor Donna Laura."

Don Ottavio looked at her gravely for a moment. "I think *she* is almost beyond pain now," he said, "the greater part of her is dead."

It seemed a very odd speech for him to make, and Mrs. Roper evidently showed her surprise, for he laughed a little, and took a pinch of snuff out of an old tortoise shell box shaped like a star-fish. "It is true," he insisted, mildly, before he sneezed, adding after he had done so, "half the people at the funeral cried—an emotional lot, we Neapolitans—but she did not cry. Her heart and her tears were all there in the coffin with Nino. He was," he went on, after a pause, finishing his glass of wine, and brushing the biscuit crumbs of his new black clothes, "not

only her son. He was the Head of the Family. She would have died for her son, but she would also have died for the Gamba. It is true that we are a great, historical family, signora, but we are not the only great family in Italy. My sister-in-law thinks we are!"

He trotted off to the tramway, back, no doubt, to his disreputable friends and haunts, but Mrs. Roper felt that she could never again loathe him quite as she had done.

Donna Laura never mentioned Nino, but she talked more and more of the coming child, and Mrs. Roper to her surprise more than once saw in the post-basket a letter in the old woman's ornate and delicate hand addressed to Sir Bartle Sandys, who was detained by a peculiarly violent attack of gout in a Sicilian mountain village. He had written, and Bruce had written, to console with Milly over Nino's death and Sappho's illness, but they had written once and no more, so that she was astonished to observe that the old man and Donna Laura were regularly corresponding.

Still, it was no business of hers, and she was not an inquisitive woman, so she thought little about it.

One day at the end of July Sappho woke up out of a long sleep and asked quietly for a glass of water. Trembling, her mother gave her one, and held her head while she drank.

"What time is it, darling?" the girl asked.

Mrs. Roper looked at her watch, which hung on a chain set with small pearls round her neck (she hated wrist watches), and answered that it was nearly five.

"Oh. Then Nino will soon be coming." Sappho lay back and closed her eyes. Her hair had been cut short, her face was pointed and bony, her eyebrows and lashes

looked as if painted on parchment in India ink. Mrs. Roper went out on the loggia and faced things. It was true, then, Sappho's mind had been unbalanced by the news of her husband's death, and would probably remain so until the baby's birth.

It had been a very warm day, and the flowering creepers (Mrs. Roper more picturesquely called them "vines") on the twisted pillars hung limp and lifeless in the sun. At the foot of the garden the sea sparkled restlessly, hurting her eyes as she stared at it.

"For six weeks it will go on. Six weeks she'll talk about him as if he were alive, she'll expect him, and I shall have to listen and answer her. I wonder if I can?"

After a pause her thoughts went on drearily. "Of course I can. And then when the baby's born and her mind's got right, she'll have to be told of Nino's death, and her misery will begin all over. Oh dear, I wish Charles Bruce was here!"

She went to Donna Laura's room and told her of the change in the patient. Donna Laura had had her hair washed, and it was now being savagely waved into its customary iron curves by a hairdresser. The two women spoke partly in English, partly in French, and their interview was awkward and unsatisfactory.

"She will ask for him," Donna Laura said at last, as the woman began to build up the elaborate tower of hair that was so absurdly ill-suited to her death-like face. "What shall we say?"

"Oh, I don't know—that he's away—on business?"

"Oui. Qu'il est absent—des affaires—in connexion with Sir Bartle——"

"Bon." Mrs. Roper rose and went slowly to the door,

every line in her lovely little body indicating discouragement and over-fatigue.

But she need not have feared questions from Sappho. The fever had indeed gone, but the young woman was extremely weak, and seemed to take her husband's absence for granted. For days she lay in a kind of stupor, out of which she would rouse herself to smile at her mother, or to say something about her baby. Now and then she spoke of her husband, but never with anxiety or even a longing to see him. "When Nino comes——" "I'm glad Nino can't see what a worm I am,"—she would say, and more often she would talk about when the three would be in England with Sir Bartle. She seemed to miss Sir Bartle, too, and Milly wrote urging him to come as soon as he was able to travel.

Doctor Avellini was delighted with the course things had taken. "Couldn't be better," he said once, rubbing his small hands, "couldn't be better. Her nerves are resting, and strengthening, and when the baby is born she will be able to bear her husband's loss as thousands of other young women have had to do." . . .

Sir Bartle and Bruce came back in mid-August, and Mrs. Roper at once went up to their villa to warn them as to how they must treat Sappho.

She found Sir Bartle very thin, but looking better in spite of his gout, and Bruce burnt almost black by the Sicilian sun. Sir Bartle kissed her affectionately, if a little absent-mindedly, and told her with a touch of malice that she looked ill.

"Yes. And old. I know. It has been a dreadful time. She will be delighted to see you, Sir Bartle."

"Is she really better?" Bruce asked gently.

"Yes. Doctor Avellini is really satisfied with her now, but——" her eyes filled with tears and for a moment she could not go on. Bruce watched her sympathetically. He was a man of conventional training, but his sub-conscious hopes, like those of everyone else, were unconventional, and ever since he had known of Gamba's death, a hope for himself had been growing in the deepest recesses of his being. Sappho was only twenty-two now, and who knew whether in a few years' time she might not grow to care for him?

"It is a good thing that the shock has affected her memory, Mrs. Roper," he said, after a pause, and she answered with would-be cheeriness, though her eyes were swimming, "Of course, only—I rather dread the coming back of her memory, for she will suffer terribly."

"She'll have the boy, she'll have the boy," broke in Sir Bartle, with a little impatience. "And we'll bring him up in England and make a fine fellow of him."

A week after this, by Dr. Avellini's advice, the Gamba household returned to Naples. The heat seemed to be over, and besides, the immensely thick walls of the palace kept it cool and comfortable in almost any weather.

"It's a long way out here, and I am particularly busy just now," the doctor added, sniffing at his yellow carnation, "and I wish to see her pretty well every day."

Sir Bartle, who had been shut up for weeks in the desolate Sicilian village, where he had been taken ill, was very glad to get back to his comfortable apartment, and having no idea, of course, who the last occupant of his bed had been, declared that he felt more like himself after one night's sleep in it.

Sappho, leaning on Donna Laura's arm—the old woman's height made her a better support than Mrs. Roper—crept slowly from bedroom to salotto, from salotto to dining-room, from dining-room to Nino's "study," in which he had studied French novels of a very pronounced character.

"When he comes back," Sappho said, "we'll have red roses in here. He always loved them best of all flowers, didn't he, mamma? Bright ones, the colour of blood."

"Yes," answered Donna Laura with unmoved face. Her face nowadays was really less like a human countenance than one carved in grey stone; even her eyes seemed fixed in her head.

Marietta, who loved her, made her eat and spend a certain number of hours every night in bed, but even Marietta was afraid of her nowadays, for, always grim, she had become ghastly.

Don Gaetano Poggi, the old lady's spiritual director, told her roundly that she spent too much time in the chapel. "It is a sin to allow one's faculties to rust, my daughter," he said firmly. "Also, the prayers of those who only pray grow stale. Your son is dead. Your grandson will need a living, human grandmother—you must, therefore, live."

Donna Laura trusted him, but she was, indeed, three-quarters dead. She could not endure Sappho's talk about Nino, so little by little she ceased to see the young woman for more than a few moments a day, and the only person who could rouse her out of her iron abstraction was Sir Bartle. Nearly every day she went down to his room, for the stairs still tried his leg, and the two would sit and plan about the little Nino's future. Donna Laura was

now to be his guardian and the administrator of his £10,000 a year, and Sir Bartle showed a very discerning confidence in his choice.

“Charles will help you with the furniture,” he said once, “for he’s made a study of it, and is an artist, and it must be well done.”

Donna Laura nodded. “Yes. The freschi on this floor are very good—cinque cento—and must be restored properly. There is a room full of chests of tapestry, ragged now, but my husband once told me, of great value. *They* must be mended. For years—long before my time—the family has been poor, and lived in only a few rooms, but there are over two hundred rooms in the palazzo, Sir Bartle!”

Sir Bartle was determined that the boy should be educated in England, but with this, Donna Laura, with a disregard, surprising in her, of possible financial consequences, so strongly disagreed that the old man little by little modified his original plan. He had a sense of justice, and could see that the old woman had right on her side when she said, “He is a Gamba, and a Gamba is an Italian, and must remain an Italian.”

It was singular how the two so utterly dissimilar old people understood each other and respected each other’s opinions. Donna Laura agreed that until the boy was seven years old all his summers might be passed with advantage at Great Roding, and Sir Bartle, though insisting still on Harrow, agreed that while he was at Harrow all his holidays should be spent in Italy.

Ruefully he admitted, too, that Italian cavalry officers were probably the finest horsemen in the world, and that

Gianbartolo could not do better than learn riding in his own country.

The days passed, and Sir Bartle, after his planning with Donna Laura, would sit with Sappho, not so much planning as dreaming about the child who was so soon to come.

Sappho's nervousness had never returned since her return to consciousness; she was placid, serene, a little absent-minded, much given to pondering her baby in her heart. She was quite happy.

And then one morning it was September, and Milly Roper, turning the August page of her calendar back over the top, stood for a moment staring at the new page, wondering what the young month would bring.

She was and looked very tired, for nothing deadened her pain and her fear, and her interest in the baby was only secondary. Her mind was fixed on her daughter, and what was coming to her.

Doctor Avellini was satisfied, but she was not, for her brain was scarred by a huge "if." If the baby should die, what would happen to Sappho's mind?

Don Giorgio di San Gervasio and the artillery captain no longer came to see her, for she no longer amused them. She was always alone except when she was with Sappho, and Sappho liked solitude nowadays. Sir Bartle, kind as he was, bored her with his fatuous talk about a child who was no kin to him, and Bruce had a way of sitting with Sappho, not talking, but making a dozen small sketches of her in an afternoon. Bruce, too, bored Milly.

She had only one interest in the world nowadays—the restoration of her daughter's brain-balance, and sometimes Sappho's happy, not so much vacant as *vague* talk

about Nino and his imminent return, was literally more than she could bear.

Very silent, very grave, very full of a kind of breathless *waiting* was the Palazzo Gamba the first half of that September.

CHAPTER VIII

ON the twenty-third of September that year it rained with almost tropical violence. Mrs. Roper had read aloud to her daughter all the morning, and in the afternoon, Sir Bartle having come up to sit with Sappho, she decided to take a walk.

Saying nothing to the others she put on her raincoat and a rubber hat, and hurried out into the dusky afternoon. At the door she met a girl of fourteen to fifteen, in very ragged clothes, who was carrying a letter.

"Is this the Palazzo Gamba?" the child asked.

"Yes."

"Is there a lady—a Signora Roper living here?"

"I am the Signora Roper. What do you want with me?"

The girl handed her the letter, was given a few coppers in return, and fled up the river-bed like street. Mrs. Roper drew back under the archway and opened the letter. "Oh, *dear*," she said aloud, as she read it. How selfish and forgetful she had been!

Through the glass doors of the lodge she could see the old porter's head nodding over a newspaper. As a rule, in return for his faithful silence about Gamba's assassination, she made a point of going into the lodge and telling the old man about Sappho's health, their plans for the future, etc., but this afternoon she went straight out into the pelting rain, the letter crunched up in her mackintosh pocket.

At the corner of the piazza she hired an open cab, and crouched behind its high-stretched rubber apron as she and Sappho had crouched the day they had bought the little bust of the Apollo Belvedere.

The old horse floundered and slipped on the greasy cobblestones, the driver cursed him and the weather dramatically, the rain beat fiercely on the cover of the botta. Mrs. Roper's face looked old and worn over the glowing wet rubber of the apron, and her mouth seemed to have grown less shapely, more taut, in the last few weeks.

Prince di San Gervasio saw her and hurried by without attempting to speak to her. He wondered if she had perhaps been in love with poor Ninetto Gamba? That would explain several things, and was at any rate a theory worth suggesting to his friends.

The botta, after some fifteen minutes rough progress, stopped in a sordid street before a cavernous door in which several ophthalmic looking children were playing, and Mrs. Roper got out. "Wait," she told the man with a curtness unusual in her.

Then she went slowly up the dirty, slippery stairs, up and up. At last she came to a landing with two doors, on one of which was tacked a card, and after inspecting the card, pulled the rusty bell-chain, and when the door was opened a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman appeared, wiping her arms on a not very clean apron.

"Ah, so you have come," the woman said, in a throaty voice rather like that of a wood-pigeon, "that is good." **Avanti, eccellenza!"**

Mrs. Roper followed her to the next room. "Here's the lady to see you, piccinina—here's the lady." Then

she closed the door on Mrs. Roper, through some obscure instinct of delicacy, and Milly advanced to the bed.

“Oh, madame. Oh, madame, it is good of you,—”

“My poor Jeanne, I am ashamed not to have come before, but—we have had dreadful trouble—how are you, my dear? And is that your baby?”

The room was dark, for a pallid light was reflected through its window from the soaking slates of a roof not five feet away from it. Jeanne’s face was barely distinguishable from her pillow, but her quick breathing sounded in the quiet like the panting of some kind of large dog.

“I’m ill, madame, very ill,” she said with difficulty as Mrs. Roper sat down by her, and with her hot hand in her own cool one “Yes, that’s my baby, pauv’ mioche.”

“Why didn’t you send for me before?”

“I knew of your trouble—M. le Marquis’ death, and the illness of Madame la Marquise. How is Madame la Marquise, madame?” the girl asked wistfully.

“She is—well, Jeanne. Her baby will be coming early next week.”

Jeanne shifted wearily on to her back. “Is it true—someone told a woman I knew—that my dear good Madame la Marquise does not—understand that M. le Marquis is dead?”

Mrs. Roper hesitated, and then, because she knew the girl had always loved her daughter, she told her the truth about Sappho’s mind.

“One c’est bien, madame, que c’est bien, cela! Ah, if the good God had only taken *my* memory from me—but there is mine beating, beating like a machine—”

“Look here, Jeanne,” Milly said resolutely, “I’m going

to light that candle and have a look at your baby. Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy, madame, thank God!"

When the stump of candle was lighted Mrs. Roper held the candlestick over the bed and gazed at the shapeless little face that, tiny and white though it was, looked almost robust besides its mother's awful pallor. "He doesn't look like Do—his father," she said briskly, "and *that's* a good thing. Do you nurse him?"

"Yes, but not very well. They say I'm pretty weak. But he does look like his father, madame. His eyes are like his, and his ears——"

The baby, annoyed by the candlelight, at this point opened his eyes, but Mrs. Roper could see in his angry glare no resemblance to Domenico's bored gaze. They were large and well-fringed, like the majority of Latin eyes, and that, it seemed to her, was all.

"He looks intelligent," she said, "and he has a beautiful head, Jeanne. How old is he?"

"He was born yesterday morning at three. He only weighs four and a half pounds. He is thin and weak. I do not," she added indifferently, "think he will live."

"Jeanne!"

Jeanne laughed softly. "Does madame then not understand," she asked with the same indifference, that *I* am dying?"

Mrs. Roper was honestly shocked and sorry. "Oh, Jeanne," she faltered, "you must get well for the baby's sake."

After a while she sought the pleasant-faced woman, who was now cooking spaghetti with a good deal of garlic in them, and found that what Jeanne had said was true.

"She's wrong inside, poveretta," Donna Marina said, stirring her spaghetti with a long-handled wooden spoon, "and her heart is bad. The doctor told me before—she's here on pension—and then again this morning. That's why she sent for you."

Mrs. Roper went back to Jeanne and sat down. "I will tell Sir Bartle about you and the baby, Jeanne, my dear," she said, steadying her voice with an effort, "and he will look after your boy. He always liked you, and he was *very* angry when I told him about Domenico."

"Domenico has sent me money," Jeanne answered drowsily. "He is in Pisa. It was not all his fault either. You mustn't blame him too much, madame. If I could tell you—" Her hands had grown hotter in the last half-hour, and after a moment she went on as if in great haste, her eyes glowing with fever. "I pursued him, *c'est cela*; that's what Donna Eusebia said. And it's always a mistake. They always hate it—oh, yes, always. But—I loved him so, and I knew—I knew I could make him care for me, the way I wanted, that once. Because he was unhappy. They are all like that—and then he hated me and was ashamed." She paused for a moment—"I wasn't ashamed when I knew I was going to have a baby but then I wanted to be married. 'Domenico,' I said, 'I want you to marry me,' but he would not."

"Don't talk about him, *ma pauvre* Jeanne. Forget him."

Jeanne stroked her baby soothingly, for it had begun to whimper in an odd, unrobust little voice. "What is it it says in the Bible? 'The sins of the Fathers—'"

Suddenly Mrs. Roper knew that she had never believed this outrageous and brutal dictum. "That's just rubbish,"

she burst out. "It wouldn't be a *God* who could do that—blame the children for their parents' sins—it would have to be a devil. Your baby stands as good a chance of growing up a fine, good man as—as my little grandson will!"

In the flickering candlelight she almost thought that Jeanne smiled. "Ah, madame, tell Madame la Marquise that I have loved her—she will not mind, now that I am dying—and that she is a saint. And she may be happy, for, oh, how M. le Marquis loved her!"

Milly Roper rose and said good-bye. "I'll tell my daughter what you said," she promised, "and—if you should not get well, I will always see your boy from time to time. You need not worry about him, my dear." She bent and kissed the girl's forehead. "I'll come again to-morrow."

At the door she turned. "Is your boy baptized?"

"Yes. My father's name. Jean Louis." Her voice trailed off into silence, and Mrs. Roper, leaving a hundred lire note with Donna Marina, went slowly down the dark stairs.

Towards two o'clock that night Mrs. Roper, who for the past fortnight had slept on the chesterfield in her daughter's room, was awakened by the sound of groans of unmistakable meaning. Sappho was sitting up in bed swaying to and fro with pain. "It's begun, mother," the girl said. "I—I thought it wasn't to be till next week."

Mrs. Roper switched on the light, made a fire, did a variety of small, necessary things, and then, still in her dressing-gown, went up to Donna Laura's room.

Donna Laura was not in bed, and Mrs. Roper, instructed by instinct rather than experience, hurried to the chapel.

Here, before the altar, lay in the candlelight a curiously flat-looking mass that was the old lady.

On hearing footsteps her hands ceased their rhythmical beating on the stone floor and she rose to a kneeling posture.

“Donna Laura,” Mrs. Roper said in a low voice, “Sappho is taken ill, and I wish you would telephone for Donna Cecilia and the doctor.”

“Donna Cecilia is at Portici until to-morrow, and Doctor Avellini will not like being waked at this hour. There is no hurry, Signora Roper.”

Donna Laura bowed and crossed herself, and unhooking a small crystal holy-water receptacle from the wall, accompanied Mrs. Roper to Sappho’s room.

“I have brought you the crystal *bénitier*, cara,” she said, “it has been in the room whenever a Gamba was born for the last three hundred years.”

“I want Nino to come,” said Sappho.

“Nino is in Rome and cannot get here till to-morrow.” It was Donna Laura who spoke, and Mrs. Roper gazed at her in amazed admiration, so convincingly and calmly did she speak. Sappho accepted the lie as the truth, and asked for a cup of coffee.

While her mother made the coffee in a little old tin pot, long a companion of her travels, Donna Laura sprinkled the bed with blessed water, brought and hung at the foot of the bed the crucifix that the old porter had laid on the dead Nino’s breast, and then, kneeling by the bed, began to pray very rapidly, as if for a wager.

At four Mrs. Roper herself rang up the doctor, only to learn that he had, fifteen minutes before, gone to the country by motor-car to a very serious case.

She had in her forty-seven years done many things, but it so happened that she had never before been present at the birth of any child but her own, and she was frightened. Sappho was brave, but there was an ominous bluish look about her nose and mouth, and her pulse seemed to her mother to be weaker.

"I shall go down and send Mr. Bruce for another doctor," she said at last to Donna Laura.

"Never! It is all going on well, and by nine Avellini will be back. He would never forgive us for sending for another doctor."

"If he doesn't like it," Mrs. Roper returned, "he can lump it. There's something wrong, and I know it. Look at the colour of her lips."

"Mother!" Sappho sat up suddenly, looking like a suffering boy with her short hair. "I won't have another doctor. Nino wouldn't like it."

"There!" cried Donna Laura, as triumphantly as if the girl had been in full possession of her wits, and after a moment the old woman left the room.

Sappho then beckoned to her mother with an odd air of shyness and whispered to her: "If the baby should die," she said, her hot breath burning her mother's ear, "it would kill Nino, and that would kill me—like the house that Jack built. So don't you let the baby die——,"

She broke off in the clutches of pain, and lay moaning among her pillows.

Suddenly Mrs. Roper felt a conviction that the baby would not live. For no reason at all she knew that it would either be born dead, or die at birth. She was sure!

"Sappho darling," she said, bending over the girl, "you believe in God. Now is the time for you to say your

prayers. Pray that God may make you strong enough to bear whatever He means to send you."

Never in her life had she spoken in such a way to her daughter, and Sappho stared at her. "Why, mother _____"

"Yes. Pray. You are no dearer to God than any other woman. It may be His will to send you suffering. Pray, pray for strength to bear whatever He sends."

After a pause came a half-made laugh, and these words: "I can bear anything, *anything*, except to lose my baby. God knows that, for I've told Him lots of times."

Superficially it seemed to Mrs. Roper utter insanity to say what she did say, but something in the depths of her knew that her moment was well chosen. "Suppose you had to choose between—Nino and the boy?"

"The baby is Nino. How can you ask such a silly question—*ah!*" She broke off in a sudden access of pain, and Mrs. Roper went into the salotto, and sitting down closed her ears for a moment with her fingers. "The baby is Nino," she said over and over again to herself. "If she feels that, she's all right—if it *lives*. But then," her thoughts went on slowly, "it isn't going to live."

The minutes passed slowly, Sappho's strength seeming to ebb away, her courage to have gone already. "I want Nino," she kept saying; "I want Nino."

Donna Laura came in once, and after crossing the sick woman and saying a prayer over her, left the room again. "I shall be in the chapel," she said to Mrs. Roper, "if you need me, but by eight Dr. Avellini will be back from the country and you can ring him up. I have many prayers to say." Mrs. Roper nodded and sat down again by the window. At last, as the sky lightened, she nodded.

Suddenly, amid the grey silence of the morning, Sappho gave a horrible cry and fainted dead away. Mrs Roper did not call Donna Laura. She worked hard for ten minutes and then, with a deep sigh, carried into the salotto the small white bundle that was Nino Gamba's dead son. Her face was very white, all the curves were gone from her mouth, grim resolution filled her hollow, dry eyes. She laid the child on a chair in a dark corner of the room, and going back to her daughter poured a liquid sleeping-draught into her half-open unconscious mouth. "Now *sleep*," she said, almost sternly.

Then she went up to the chapel and told Donna Laura that Sappho was asleep. "I'm going to lie down on the sofa," she added, "but I'll call you the minute anything happens."

It was six o'clock when Donna Marina Sanchi, roused by a knock at her door, opened it and found Mrs. Roper standing outside.

"How is Jeanne?"

"She died at eleven o'clock last night."

"I have come for the baby."

The woman nodded indifferently, for she was very sleepy. "Va bene, signora, she said you'd come, povera anima—will you look at her? She's a lovely corpse."

But Mrs. Roper was afraid of any more emotions. She had reached the end of her strength, and knew it. "No thank you, I will come again to-day. Now I must hurry. Give me the baby."

Under a dingy window on the staircase she sat down, undid a parcel she had brought with her, and dressed Jeanne Prou's baby from head to foot in beautiful gar-

ments made for her grandson. The baby, who had a comfortable dose of boiled poppy heads from Donna Marina, slept peacefully, and when his costume was complete she rolled him up in a shawl, tucked him under her big cape, and hurried home.

The distance, thanks to several short cuts, was considerably less on foot than by carriage, and it was barely seven when she opened the door of Sappho's salotto. All was still, and the room, with its closely drawn curtains, almost as dark as it had been at midnight.

Mrs. Roper tiptoed softly to the bedroom door. Sappho still slept, though she had changed her position.

Mrs. Roper turned the bedclothes softly back and laid the living child in her daughter's arms.

It was done, thank God!

Then she looked up sharply. In the shadow near the corridor door stood Donna Laura.

"Oh—you frightened me."

Donna Laura quite noiselessly drew nearer, her face looking more dead than ever.

"Whose child is that?" she asked in an undertone, but not whispering.

"Whose child?"

"Yes, I saw you bring it in. And I came in half an hour ago and—and found my son's son dead in the salotto."

For a long time the two women stared at each other, and then Mrs. Roper, drawing Donna Laura into the salotto, shut the door and sat down. "She would die—or lose her mind, if she knew the baby was dead," she said slowly, "so I got this baby to—to help her bear Nino's death. In six weeks or so, when she is well and—has

got again, used to Nino's death, I will tell her, and she can either adopt the child or—send it away. It's only for a few weeks."

"Whose baby is it?" Donna Laura's face had softened a little, and to Mrs. Roper's surprise the old woman laid one of her big, cold hands on her shoulder as she put the question.

"Jeanne's and Domenico's. Jeanne died last night. Oh, Donna Laura——"

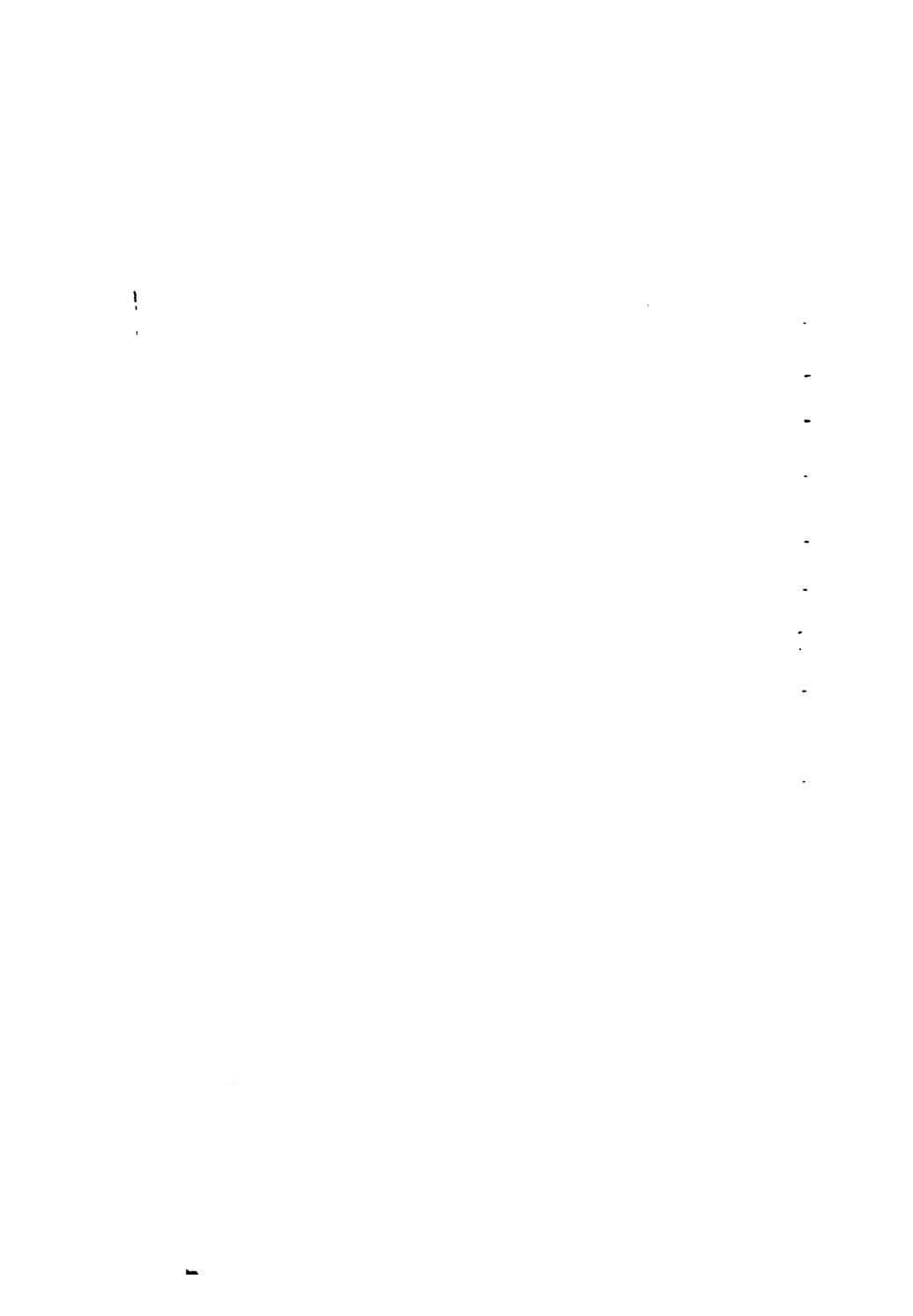
Quite suddenly all her strength left her. She felt that she could not do, nor say, any more. Donna Laura patted her shoulder clumsily, saying: "There is no harm in it—it may save her reason—I am sorry for you, Signora Roper."

Milly Roper remembered no more. It was late in the evening when she awoke to hear from the doctor that Sappho was better, the baby well, and Donna Laura as inexpensive as a grandmother as she had been expansive as a mother.

"A strange woman," Avellini said, "but she has taken great care of the marchesa all day."

"Donna Laura is a saint," Mrs. Roper answered slowly.

PART THREE



PART THREE

CHAPTER I

SAPPHO's recovery was slow, but there were no complications, and little by little Mrs. Roper, through being able to rest mentally as well as physically, grew stronger. Her hair was very grey in front, and certain lines in her face had come to stay, but they were not disfiguring lines, and Charles Bruce, for one, considered that her beauty, though a little faded, was of a higher type than before.

Sappho had been told, by Doctor Avellini's advice, that Nino had been obliged to go to South America a few weeks before, and would return when the baby was about four weeks old.

"It's queer, mother," the young woman said once, "that I can't remember his going—everything seems sort of veiled and vague,"—

"No wonder, darling," Milly answered cheerfully, with a critical glance at the roses she was arranging on a little table near the bed. "I've told you that you were as crazy as a loon the last two months before the baby was born—a very common thing, too, Avellini says."

Bruce had an Irish friend in Argentina, and had arranged for him to send a series of cablegrams signed "Nino." These messages Sappho kept in a silk letter-case under her pillow, and re-read every day. She wondered why no letters came from her husband, as she was still very weak and her ideas of distance and time were nebulous, she did not worry, contenting herself with

saying every evening to her mother, "A letter may come to-morrow, don't you think?"

After a while Sir Bartle simplified things still further by suggesting that Nino had already started home, and had not written because he wanted to surprise her. Sappho had always loved surprises, and this idea gave her the greatest pleasure.

"Some day, Ninetto mio," she said to the baby, "the door will open and your papa will just come walking in, and *then* won't you be delighted!"

Avellini came every day, and told Mrs. Roper honestly that he dreaded, rather than hoped for a sudden return of his patient's memory. "She is too weak for any shock, you know," he added, pursing his lips, "and every day that goes by without her knowing the truth is of almost incalculable value to us——" After a moment he added, thoughtfully, "it is a good thing that she adores the baby as she does."

Mrs. Roper did not speak for a moment, and then she said, "Yes, she adores him. Doctor, is he a healthy baby? I mean—suppose—suppose anything happened to *him*?"

"If the baby died—but I see no reason why he should—I could not answer for the consequences. Your daughter is a very unusual nature, signora. I have never seen such narrowly concentrated affections, and that, in this world of hazard, is a most perilous thing."

Donna Laura was sitting in her gaunt, chilly drawing-room, when, a few minutes after the doctor's departure, Mrs. Roper joined her. The two women had not been drawn together by the possession of a secret; they had

absolutely nothing in common, and both were too honest to feign a friendship they did not feel, but they now looked at one thing from the same standpoint. Sappho's health.

They were waiting for her to be well so that the deceit that had saved her life might be confessed, and they were both alarmed and troubled by her long-continued weakness.

"I have been talking with the doctor," Mrs. Roper began without preamble, sitting down by the tiny fire that looked a mere spark in the cavernous grey fireplace.

"Yes?"

"He says she is still very weak."

"I know. I do not think that she is really quite conscious a great part of the time." Donna Laura was sewing, and her bony hands moved clumsily over her work as she talked. She looked a very old woman now, but she did not look ill, and no grey showed in her elaborately dressed hair. She wore a new black alpaca gown, almost completely covered with cheap, brownish crape, and Mrs. Roper could hear, as she spoke, the muffled ticking of Nino's watch, which she wore in an inner pocket over her flat breast. There was to the little American something almost terrible in the ticking of the watch; it was as if his dead heart was beating there in place of his mother's broken one.

"He says," Mrs. Roper went on, after a moment, "that the baby is—all right."

"Children of that kind always live."

"I suppose so. But—it's nearly four weeks now, and—there seems to be no prospect of our being able to tell her the truth for a long time yet."

"She will," Donna Laura answered, "soon find out

about—my son's death. The lack of letters will rouse her finally, and she'll ask one of us."

Mrs. Roper shivered. Dearly as she had always loved her daughter, the last months had made her love her more; Sappho's helplessness, and the pathos of her position had roused in her mother a devouring passion of tenderness.

"I—I have saved Colonel Blunt's notes about the fever," she said slowly, "it will never occur to her to doubt that he died of fever. "Oh!" she cried with sudden sharpness, "how terrible all this lying is!"

Donna Laura looked at her curiously. It seemed to the old woman odd that Mrs. Roper, with her lack of religion, and her lovers, should so mind lying. To the Latin woman a lie was a sin, but it was not a thing constitutionally repulsive to her. She herself did not lie, because it was wrong, and because she would have hated to confess that she had done so, but Milly's little shiver of disgust seemed to her either a ridiculous American peculiarity or an insincere pose.

"H'm!" she said. "As soon as she is stronger I will tell her. She will see that if I can bear my son's death she can bear her husband's. Besides," she added, in a changed voice, "she has the baby."

"Yes—until she's got over the shock of Nino's death."

The long high room was like the bony structure of a drawing-room; there were the bones, but the usual flesh of upholstery was absent. The October sun lay in a pale parallelogram on the oiled brick floor, and showed the threadbareness of the one rug; the ugly grey of the walls looked like a coating prepared for the real colour; the chairs were spidery, uncushioned, and there were not many of them.

It was a room that always affected Milly Roper's nerves disastrously, and it affected them now.

"The doctor is worried," she burst out suddenly. "I can see that, and—what *will* she say when I confess that the baby is not hers? Oh, Donna Laura, if only her baby had lived?"

Donna Laura laid down her sewing and looked more kindly at her; more, Milly thought, as she had looked the morning when she had put Jeanne's baby into Sappho's arms. "The Lord our God is a jealous God," the old woman answered. "We do not love Him as we love His creatures, and—He smites us. I loved my son too much, and God took him from me. Sappho loved her husband more than she loves God (for, so far as I can see, she does not love Him at all), so God smote her. I should have adored my son's son, so God took *him* too. It's all very simple, signora."

"But how *can* people love God," Milly cried in helpless expostulation, "if He is such a monster of cruelty?"

"He is not a monster of cruelty. He is, as He told Moses, a jealous God."

Nino's watch seemed to tick very loud in the ensuing silence, and Mrs. Roper rose. "I must go back to her now," she said, trying to speak as usual.

Donna Laura accompanied her to the door of the apartment. She was always extremely courteous in her grim way. "When she finds out about Nino," the old woman said, as they shook hands, "send for me. I can help her better than you, because his death has killed me."

A few days later Sir Bartle's man, Parker, came up to Donna Laura's apartment, and presenting his master's

compliments in very bad French, requested Donna Laura to do Sir Bartle the favour of coming down to his salotto for a few minutes.

She found Sir Bartle sitting by a splendid fire, with Charles Bruce and a little dried-up Englishman who was introduced to her as Mr. Hobday.

“I’ve been making a codicil to my will,” Sir Bartle explained, “and Mr. Hobday, who is a solicitor, has been kind enough to see that it’s all right.”

Donna Laura’s face went a curious lead colour, against which her long, straight lips looked as though she had been eating mulberries.

“The—the baby is very young,” she stammered, “and very delicate.”

Sir Bartle smiled kindly at her. He looked stronger, and some of his old colour had come back to his face. He liked Donna Laura, and was deeply sorry for her, but in some sub-conscious way the devastation of her face flattered him and made him feel well-pleased with himself.

“Dr. Avellini told me this morning that the baby was doing splendidly,” he said, “and when I saw him this afternoon the rogue took hold of my thumb and wouldn’t let go! *He’ll* do all right, and I only wish Sappho was as strong as he is.”

Bruce, who had grown very thin in the long anxiety over Sappho, smiled sympathetically at the old woman. “I am sure, for my part,” he said, “that my aunt would be delighted with my uncle’s plan of leaving that money of hers to Nino’s boy. She always liked Nino, you know—she was fond of his singing.”

“Quite so, quite so,” added Sir Bartle warmly, “and

do you know, I'm beginning to see quite a likeness in the baby to Nino!"

Donna Laura felt that she could endure no more. She had acquiesced in Mrs. Roper's desperate plan for saving Sappho's life, or her reason, but she could not bear that anyone should see a likeness in the bastard of two servants to her beautiful dead son. "I am not well, Sir Bartle," she said hoarsely, "and I have changed my mind about—about your kind offer. I think that you should leave Lady Sandys's money to—to some one of your own relations."

She stalked woodenly to the door, and with an awkward bow closed it behind her, leaving Sir Bartle and the solicitor thoroughly surprised.

Bruce sat for a while, his thin face thoughtful, while Sir Bartle dilated on his sudden conviction that Donna Laura was a little mad. "She used to be particularly practical," he said, "as sound and hard in financial matters as any woman I ever came across, but since poor Nino's death—he died very suddenly of fever, Mr. Hobday—I've noticed a great change in her. Well, now let's get on with the will. She'll be all right to-morrow,—"

It seemed to Mrs. Roper very extraordinary that no question had arisen about Nino's death. After all, he had been murdered almost in front of his own house, before eleven o'clock, on a July night!

To be sure it had been raining, but Naples is not an early-to-bed going town, and the houses opposite the palace were almost all let out in apartments, so that someone might have been expected to have seen or heard something of the murder.

But time passed, winter approached, and despite the fact that six people know the truth, no outsider ever hinted at the possibility of the young man's death not having been a natural one.

Colonel Blunt came once or twice to see Mrs. Roper but they did not talk of the dreadful night, and on the occasion of his last call she learned from him that Doctor Palma had gone to America with the money he had received, and that the old servant at the villa at Covioli had had a stroke, and was speechless and most probably dying. Thus there remained of those who knew the truth only Colonel Blunt, Donna Laura, the ancient porter who was absolutely to be trusted, Mrs. Roper and the assassin himself.

"Has nothing ever been heard of him—of the Greek?" Milly asked.

Blunt shook his head. Nothing! Naples is full of Greek scum. How is your daughter, Mrs. Roper?"

"Oh, she's still very weak; so weak that she doesn't bother much even about Nino's absence. She is very happy with her—with the baby. He seems to fill her mind."

"That's a good thing."

"Yes, poor child. Mr. Bruce's friend, Mr. Meade, sends an occasional cable signed 'Nino,' but—she is too weak really to think. It's a mercy, of course," she went on, her eyes bright with tears, "but it's—it's hard to watch, sometimes."

During the slowly progressing weeks Sir Bartle once more became Sappho's favourite companion. His adoration for the baby, who he, of course, never doubted was

Nino and Sappho's son, was a great comfort to the young woman, for however hard her mother tried to feign the proper grandmotherly enthusiasm, she did not quite succeed in satisfying her maternal pride.

"I don't believe you love him very much, mother," the girl said once, snatching her treasure back from her mother's arms. "Sir Bartle holds him much better than you do."

But an hour later Milly found her crying in the dusk in a bewildered, half-frightened way. "Mother," she said, as the door closed, "*why* don't I have a letter from Nino?"

Mrs. Roper switched on a shaded light and sat down. "My darling, you have a cablegram every few days."

"Yes, but I want a letter. I want him. I want him to come home."

"He—the cables always say he's busy," her mother faltered, stroking her wrist gently in a way she liked. "Do you know that baby has gained nearly half a pound this week? Perhaps he's going to be a giant!"

Sappho laughed softly. "Perhaps he is! He grows more like Nino every day, doesn't he?"

"I think he looks like you, pettie."

"No, mother. He's exactly like Nino, though Donna Laura and you can't see it. Give him to me, I want to feel him while he sleeps. . . ."

One day early in December, when little Nino was nearly three months old, an unexpected visitor came to see him. It was a cold day, and the windows rattled every now and then in the wind. Sappho, in a silk tea-gown of a lovely diaphanous blue, was sitting in an easy chair by

the fire, round which tall screens had been drawn to concentrate the cosiness, the baby in her arms.

She was not asleep, nor even half asleep, her mother, watching her, realized, but she was also not fully awake. She was brooding, as she now so often brooded, her partly closed eyes fixed on the baby's face.

Mrs. Roper, who was sewing, watched her in silence; she was better now, and slept well, and the beautifully shaped bones of her face grew less prominent. If only she knew about Nino's death, her mother thought desperately. If only the knowledge of it could by God's mercy gradually penetrate her still veiled brain. It is not too much to say that Mrs. Roper would not have hesitated to give her own life in exchange for such an end to her problems. "But it won't happen that way," the troubled woman thought. "Her mind will just clear with a bang some day, and she'll ask, and we'll have to tell her, and then she'll be ill again. My God! And when she's getting better, if she does get better after that, I'll have to tell her about the baby!"

It was at this point that the door opened, and, walking very quietly, Don Ottavio Gamba came round the screen.

The two women had not seen him for months, and to both he seemed to have improved, at least in looks. He was well-dressed, his dark face shaved with care, and in his coat he wore a white flower.

"I thought," he said, agreeably, when they had shaken hands, "that it was about time I took a look at my grand-nephew." He smiled down at the baby, who appeared to like him, and tried to swallow the finger that was gently prodding its cheek. "A fine little fellow, *Donna Saffò*,"

he went on, sitting down and drawing his chair near the one in which she was sitting, "may I take him?"

To Mrs. Roper's astonishment he took the baby with the greatest gentleness and skill, holding him at arm's length and then gathering him to his breast in a way much appreciated by the child, who smiled at him and tried to bite his nose thus bespeaking high favour.

"A lot of hair he's got, too," Don Ottavio went on, "and he's strong. Going to bite my nose off. are you Birbone?" he added to the baby.

Sappho laughed softly. "He likes you, Don Ottavio," she said, "doesn't he, mother?"

"Evidently!"

Don Ottavio looked at Mrs. Roper. "You are surprised, signora," he said dryly, "because, like all Americans, you forget that blood is thicker than water."

Suddenly Milly Roper's blood seemed to stand still in her veins. She had remembered that Don Ottavio, whom no one had expected to call, had not been told of Sappho's ignorance of her husband's death! Suppose he should refer to it!

Almost fainting, she tried to catch his eye, but he was engrossed with the baby, and did not notice her efforts.

"Don't you think he's very much like Nino?" Sappho asked suddenly, and the lights, so far as Milly was concerned, went out in a sudden haze. Out of the haze came the old man's voice: "There's a very strong resemblance," he said, "particularly about the ears and the thumbs."

And then still in the haze Milly caught his eyes, full of reassurance, fixed on hers, and he rose. "Good-bye, little great-nephew," he said, laying the child in his mother's arms, "I must go now!"

He kissed Sappho's hand and then her mother's, and left the room.

"How *nice* he was, mother," Sappho said, much pleased with the visit, "poor old man, I don't believe he's half so bad as people say."

Mrs. Roper laughed. "Perhaps not. I must run down for some more lace, darling, I'll be back in a minute."

As she had known he would be, Don Ottavio was waiting for her in her sitting-room.

"You—you wanted to speak to me?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes. I am sorry you were frightened, but, as a matter of fact, Marietta, whom I met one day weeks ago, told me of Donna Saffo's—ignorance of poor Nino's death."

"Oh! Yes, I *was* frightened, for she is still very weak, and Dr. Avellini says that any shock might—might affect her mind. You can see for yourself, Don Ottavio," she went on hurriedly, "that her brain is not quite normal yet."

"Si, poveretta si, si. You need not be afraid of any indiscretion from me, Signora," the old man answered, darting bird-like glances round the pleasant little room. "I am never stupid—"

After a pause he went on in the same voice, "but I am sometimes vindictive."

Mrs. Roper started. "Why do you tell me such a queer thing?"

"Has the baby," he asked, instead of answering her question, "been baptized?"

"Yes, he was very delicate at first, and he was baptized the day he was born."

"I see. What's his name?"

"Giovanni."

Don Ottavio nodded slowly, and as slowly went on speaking, as he stroked his top hat. "Where," his quiet voice said, "did they bury the *real* one?"

Mrs. Roper never could recall much of the conversation that followed this query. She found that Don Ottavio had known from the very first of her substitution of the living child for the dead one—that substitution that, looked back on, wore an air of such melodramatic absurdity; she found that Donna Laura's being an accessory after the fact did not at all surprise him, and that he too, in consideration of Sappho's health and what he vaguely called 'the rest,' considered the temporary fraud to have been perfectly justifiable.

"As soon as she realizes that poor Nino is dead," Milly said several times, "and has got a little used to it, I shall, of course, tell her about the baby."

Don Ottavio agreed gravely. "Sicuro, sicuro. Poor young thing," he murmured.

He said little more, except to ask who the child's real parents were—and over the truthful though reluctant answer, he gave an odd, parrot-like whistle—and shortly afterwards took his leave.

Mrs. Roper stood for some minutes near the door, where she had said good-bye to him, thinking deeply. How on earth, she wondered, had he found out?

He had rooms in the palace, of course, but one hardly ever met him on the stairs or in the passages, and he had been a long time in Rome. . . .

Donna Laura, whom she told of Don Ottavio's visit, was alarmed by it. "He is a Gamba," she said, wringing

her hands nervously, "but he is a mascalzone—a scoundrel. He will use what he knows to get money from us."

"Pah! He won't get any money from *me*!"

"But he will threaten to tell everybody—he could make a bad story of it—it would disgrace us."

Milly gave an angry little snort. "Rubbish," she returned stoutly, "it has saved my daughter's reason, and as soon as we can we are going to tell her. Where's the harm?"

Donna Laura drew a deep breath, and Nino's watch ticked loudly. "It's fraud," she said drearily. "I pray about it every day and every night, but it's fraud. Besides, there's Sir Bartle's will."

"My goodness," Mrs. Roper cried impatiently, "if you're worrying about *that*, why wouldn't you let me tell him before he *made* the codicil? He'd have understood perfectly, and he'll have to be told as soon as Sappho is, anyhow!"

Donna Laura stalked silently to the chapel and lay down on the floor before the altar. She could not answer Mrs. Roper's question, for she was ashamed to admit that she had not let Sir Bartle be told because she could not at once relinquish the idea of the £10,000 a year. Sooner or later he must know, of course, and the codicil would be cut out of his will, but in the meantime it gave her an extraordinary feeling of happiness to know that the money had been bequeathed to the baby whom everyone believed to be her grandson. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand *lire* a year!

"Oh, God; oh, our Lady," she prayed, "if Mrs. Roper and Ottavio died, surely You would *make* me tell? Surely You would not *let* me be unable to tell?"

CHAPTER II

ONE afternoon, just before Christmas, Sir Bartle sent Parker to ask Mrs. Roper to be so kind as to come down and see him. Parker, a sleek man who spoke in his quality of courier various languages outrageously badly, delivered his message with an air of mystery that amused Mrs. Roper.

"Of course I'll come down, Parker," she said, more sharply than it was usual with her to speak, "but you needn't whisper."

"Beg pardon, madam, Sir Bartle told me not to let 'er ladyship hear. I fahncy," he added with conscious elegance, "that it 'as something to do with 'er ladyship."

Mrs. Roper, who had invited a young American clergyman and his wife to dinner, and was in the kitchen busy with her hospitable preparations, took off her apron, committed the basting of the ducks to the tender but ignorant care of her little maid, and hurried downstairs.

Sir Bartle, to her surprise, was limping restlessly up and down the great drawing-room, his red face furrowed with lines of anxiety. "Oh, there you are, my dear," he said, shaking hands with her and sitting down beside her on the big sofa by the fire, "I was afraid you might be out."

"No, I've got some friends dining with me, and have been preparing some American food for them. What's the matter, Bartle?"

He looked at her for a second and then answered

abruptly: "It's Sappho. I've just left her, and I am almost sure, Milly, that she's beginning to suspect."

Mrs. Roper turned a shade paler, but said at once, in much her usual voice: "I hope she is; the very best thing that could happen."

"Good God, how can you be so—so heartless? I mean about poor Nino!"

"So do I, Bartle. He's been dead six months and the baby is three months old—we can't expect to keep the truth from her indefinitely, and besides, she's much stronger of late."

Sir Bartle shook his head. He had forgotten his old love for Milly Roper, and loved Sappho and the baby as if they had been of his own flesh and blood. "She will suffer horribly," he said, his voice full of reproach.

Milly laughed. "I didn't make poor Nino die," she said, hardening her heart deliberately, "nor did I create the world. And I honestly don't think, Bartle, that it will in the end—*in the end*, understand me—really hurt Sappho to have her share of pain."

Sir Bartle said nothing for a moment. He was plainly horrified by her unmotherly brutality, and sat holding his dark-veined old hands up to the fire. Presently Mrs. Roper asked him what Sappho had said to make him think that she had begun to suspect.

"She didn't say exactly anything definite," he answered slowly, "she was holding Ninetto, and suddenly she hugged him till he nearly cried, and told me that she could bear anything so long as she had him. 'Anything, Uncle Bartle!' she had repeated, rather wildly, 'because after all Ninetto is Nino.'"

Mrs. Roper swallowed hard. "Was—was that all?"

"No. After a while she said to me that she dreamt of Nino every night and that he didn't seem to be in South America at all. It—it was more the way she said it than what she said," he ended.

Mrs. Roper nodded. "Her mind is much more active this last week," she said, "she told me yesterday that she was very sorry for Donna Laura and when I asked her why she said because Donna Laura must miss Nino so awfully." Milly went back to her kitchen very thoughtful.

As the days passed it seemed to everyone who saw her that Sappho was changing very much. She was more active, brooded less, and there was a new, thoughtful expression in her eyes.

The baby had become a delightful little fellow in the last few weeks, and though rather delicate, was developing in every way. His nurse, a tall, serene peasant from the Abruzzi, was very proud of him and marched him up and down Sir Bartle's little terrace every day, while Sappho and Sir Bartle looked on.

Sappho said nothing more to Sir Bartle about Nino, and she had suddenly grown very tender with Donna Laura, rather to her mother's surprise.

"Oh, I know you wonder why I like her better, mother," the young woman said once, "particularly as she hardly ever speaks to Ninetto, but I have my reasons. My head has been queer for a long time, but it's better now, and—well, when I am really strong I'll tell you."

Once her mother found her crying violently over a pair of gloves of Nino's that she had found stuffed down at the back of one of the easy chairs, but she gave no reason for her tears.

She was taking cod-liver oil with malt, she drank quarts of milk, and went for a short walk every day with her mother.

The situation was to Mrs. Roper extremely uncomfortable, but she did nothing to change it. The cablegrams still came from time to time from Bruce's friend in Argentina and Sappho now always shut herself into her bedroom to read them. Mrs. Roper, under the strain, began to lose weight again, and the lines round her eyes grew deeper and fixed.

"I'm afraid you're having a bad time," Bruce said to her once, and to her own horror and disgust she burst into tears. "Do you think she *knows*?" she cried. "Do you think she *knows*?"

But Bruce shook his head. "I have no idea. Sometimes I think she does, and then—then, I think it's nature—or God—preparing her subconscious mind for what she must be told soon. At all events I do not think we need fear for her mind again. The baby will keep *that* right."

Milly blew her nose miserably. Sappho's passion for the baby grew fiercer and deeper every day, and yet even that was based on a lie.

"What shall I *do*?" she once wailed to Donna Laura. "How can I tell her?"

Donna Laura started gloomily at her. "One thing at a time," she returned harshly. "It is only six months, and she no longer misses my son unbearably; she will get over the loss of the baby, too."

Donna Laura rarely left her own apartment nowadays; the weekly dinners and tea parties had been tacitly given up, and Mrs. Roper understood the old woman's avoid-

ance of the young one and of the child who was of no kin to her.

Donna Laura had lost all she cared for, Mrs. Roper thought, in the world, whereas she had her daughter still.

"Donna Laura," she said once, laying her pretty hand on the old marchesa's sleeve, "I am very sorry for you."

Donna Laura looked at her hand as if it were a phenomenon she had never before observed, and drew back a little. "My son was perfect," she said slowly, "there was no one like him in the world, and he is dead. His child died because your daughter is a weakling. But I need no pity. There is still," she ended, "God."

Milly left her puzzled and a little annoyed, and on Christmas Eve something happened that greatly increased her perplexity.

Sappho and the baby were at Sir Bartle's and Mrs. Roper was preparing an American Christmas dinner for her daughter, Sir Bartle and Bruce, when she heard an odd noise as of many men dragging something very heavy up the passage.

Her rooms were on the same landing as Donna Laura's, and she ran out with floury hands and peeped round the corner to see what was happening.

To her amazement four men were coaxing an immense painting in a heavy gold frame into the door of Donna Laura's salotto.

Mrs. Roper went back to her kitchen, but the sounds were repeated every half-hour or so, and she knew that either more pictures or furniture was being brought upstairs.

At last, at the sound of a tremendous crash, she rushed

out to find an immense Venetian wedding chest lying on the floor with one end smashed, and four sweating men excusing themselves loudly to Donna Laura who was grey with anger.

Just round Milly's corner, invisible to Donna Laura, Don Ottavio leaned against the wall, chuckling unamiably. "They've ruined it," he said, "and she'd like to murder them all!"

"But—what *are* the things?" Mrs. Roper asked, too curious to consider the advisability of questioning the old man. "They've been carrying pictures up, too."

He nodded. "I know. She's bought back the famous Gamba Carracciolo, and four or five old family portraits and most of this furniture. She bought them back from the Albinetti family—at double their price, of course. Alberto Albinetti is as pleased as a priest on a feast day."

He followed Milly into her sitting-room, for her knees had suddenly weakened; she felt that she must sit down. Donna Laura buying back the family treasures! That meant money, and she could only have obtained money from the baby's estate. So she intended to keep up the pretence of the baby being poor Nino's. She must have gone mad.

Mrs. Roper could hardly believe it, and yet it was the only possible explanation of the old marchesa's lavish spending of money. She was the baby's guardian, of course, but—Sir Bartle had settled the money on the child because he believed it to be Nino's and Sappho's . . .

At dinner that evening Sir Bartle, who had been in to see the baby, came back rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

"My Christmas present to you, Sappho," he declared,

beaming at her, "is this. Ninetto is to have his income at once—instead of waiting. Donna Laura says it will be much easier to get back the scattered Gamba pictures and so on *now* than it would be in twenty years' time. So the young gentleman received, through his grandmother, his first quarterly allowance of two thousand, eight hundred pounds last week."

Sappho smiled "I know. Donna Laura told me. She is very happy."

"I am the other guardian, am I not?" Mrs. Roper asked quietly, eating her cream of tomato soup.

"You are, and Charles is the third." Sir Bartle was immensely enjoying his own generosity. "Donna Laura knows where every single Gamba treasure has gone to in the last three or four generations," he went on. "It seems there is a Benvenuto Cellini vase, and a painting by some celebrity or other—I forget his name—in the Vatican gallery, and one of the cardinals is going to get them back for her. I've never in all my life," he added, "known anyone with such a worship for her family."

"It's all for Ninetto," Sappho said absently. "She hardly ever comes to see him—I suppose his resemblance to Nino upsets her—but it is enough for her that he is Nino's son."

The meal was to Mrs. Roper a ghastly one. Sappho was in one of her vague moods, and talked little. Bruce watched her with pained attention, and only Sir Bartle was cheerful and enjoyed himself.

"It's absurd his settling all that money on a strange child," Milly said to Bruce once, when at a cry from the baby Sappho and Sir Bartle had rushed from the room,

"people don't *do* such things." She spoke with strong irritation, and Bruce looked at her attentively.

"He is an immensely rich man, you know," he answered slowly. "I suppose he has from forty to fifty thousand a year, and this money never has been his, so it was easy to give it away."

"Hasn't he any relations?"

"Only me and an old maid sister older than himself."

"I see," Milly replied; "but it's ridiculous just the same. And I don't think poor old Donna Laura is quite—quite sane. She has changed very much lately, and is as queer as she can be. Besides, the baby is very delicate. Suppose he—" She broke off suddenly, her mind made up to tell Sir Bartle the truth the very next day, before any more of his money was spent.

But she did not tell him the next day, for it was on the next day that Sappho suddenly fully realized that her husband was dead.

It happened in the least dramatic of ways. Eugenio the old chef, who had left just before Nino's death and gone into service in Milan, was back in Naples for the holidays and happened to meet Sappho, Celestina the nurse, and the baby, on their Christmas morning walk.

It was a fine day, and they had gone for the first time that winter to the villa, and were walking slowly towards the aquarium under the palm trees.

Celestina, large and handsome with her checked white-and-scarlet cap ribbons, nearly a foot wide, reaching to the hem of her dark skirt, the gold balls in her thick, wooly black hair, and warm, dark-blue cloak, bore the baby

on a laced pillow and marched rather than walked, being one of those women who manage to look almost like a procession even when they are alone. Sappho, who had had a cablegram from Argentina that morning, wore new furs, and a small fur hat that suited her shorn head, now covered with soft curls. She looked fairly well, but there was in her eyes the bewildered look always, of late, to be seen in them after the receipt of one of the cablegrams. She walked along, her hand on the boy's pillow, not seeing the few friends she passed, her eyes fixed on some inward view.

And then at last she grew tired, and they sat down on a bench not far from the one where, over three years ago, Sir Bartle had come across her mother.

"Look, look, gioia," the nurse cried to the baby, "look, little angel from heaven, see the pretty balloons!"

An old man with a great clump of old-fashioned gas balloons that tugged and jerked to get away from him, passed the bench, and the three-month-old Ninetto, to his mother's delight, suddenly held out both hands and laughed aloud at them.

It was at that moment that old Eugenio the cook recognized Sappho and approached, hat in hand, his new yellow boots creaking on the gravel. "Eccellenza," he cried, "does her Excellency permit that old Eugenio wishes her a happy New Year? Ah, the beautiful child!"

He had a round, rosy face, with a fiery nose that the baby found greatly to his taste. The baby gurgled and brandished his arms, and Eugenio admired him to his mother's perfect satisfaction. "What a beautiful signorino, eccellenza! How old is he?"

"He is three months old. He likes you, Eugenio."

And then Eugenio said in all good faith: "To think, Eccellenza, that I can remember our sainted marchesino when he was no older than this little man."

Sainted.

Sappho knew Italian very thoroughly by this time, and she knew that this word, used in this way, could have only one meaning.

She leaned back against the scaly trunk of the palm tree and watched the world float away from her. . . . They brought her home in a cab, and she sat by the fire in the porter's lodge while the terrified Celestina ran upstairs for Mrs. Roper, and while she was alone with the old porter she asked him one question. "I have been very ill, you know, Aristide," she said, "and my head has not been quite clear. Tell me—how long ago did—the Signor Marchesino—die?"

And Aristide told her the truth with merciful simplicity. "Signora Marchesa," he said, "it was in June."

When Mrs. Roper came into the tiny and overheated room she found her daughter quite calm.

"Poor mother," Sappho said, "how dreadful it must have been for you. I am glad you did not tell me, though," she added, sipping the wine her mother had brought, "for now I am stronger and will be able to bear it—for Ninetto's sake. . . ."

Later, in her bedroom, she cried piteously, mourning her young husband as if she had lost him only the day before, but there was no longer any confusion in her mind, and she read and re-read old Colonel Blunt's notes over and over again, without the slightest doubt as to the truth of what was in them.

In the evening she sent for Donna Laura, and they wept in each other's arms, which seemed to do them both good, while Mrs. Roper looked on in helpless bewilderment.

Donna Laura could not have forgotten that the baby over whose cradle they hung was in reality the child of strangers, she thought, and yet she agreed with apparent sincerity to every word that Sappho said about the child. Milly had a bad cold and felt wretchedly ill, but she stayed in her daughter's apartment until the old marchesa had gone, and she helped Sappho to bed.

"My darling, my dearie," she said over and over again, "you are so brave, so wonderful!"

But Sappho shook her head, saying each time: "No, it's not that, mother dear. It's that I have Ninetto, and that Ninetto *is* Nino. I have Nino in Ninetto."

As she went downstairs, feverish and aching all over, Mrs. Roper groaned aloud to herself. How long, she asked herself, would it be before she had to tell Sappho the truth about the baby?

She was ill for over a week, and lay tossing with fever in her bed, waited on by the good little Carolina, and visited once or twice every day by Sappho. "I can't stay, darling," the young woman said each time, "because it might be influenza, and I must not catch it because of Ninetto."

The fact that her husband had been dead for six months seemed to play a greater part in her endurance of her loss than her mother could quite understand. Her eyes were often red in the mornings, but she cried little by day, and was almost consistently calm and serene in her manner.

One thing, however, her mother noticed. She never left the baby for an hour. He was with her all day, even when he slept, and his cradle now stood close beside her bed, instead, as hitherto, at the other end of the room, near Celestina's.

Mrs. Roper's mind had been under so severe a strain for so long that she welcomed the fever and headache that forced her brain into other channels of thought. She saw Sappho calm and busy with her baby, and, for the time, that was enough. Later, she knew, she must "have it out" with Donna Laura, and unless Donna Laura would consent to stop spending the money to which Jeanne Prou's baby had no right, then Milly must tell the whole story to Sir Bartle.

"But"—and there was infinite comfort in the thought—"not yet, not yet. I'm ill. I have high fever, and I ache all over—I mustn't think," she would tell herself. "Avellini says I mustn't think."

CHAPTER III

ONE evening, early in January, when she had been out of bed for an hour, and gladly gone back to it, Mrs. Roper was surprised to have an unannounced visit from Donna Laura.

“I hope you are better,” the old woman said absently, sitting down and folding her hands in her lap. “I have sent down to inquire every day.”

“Thanks, I’m better, but I’m not very strong yet.” Mrs. Roper was glad of her own weakness; glad of the feebleness of her voice. Illness was not an affliction, she felt, it was a refuge.

“No,” Donna Laura answered, “I can see you are weak, but I rang up Doctor Avellini just now, and he said I might come in for half an hour; it’s very important.”

Milly hated her for a moment, and turning her face to the wall closed her eyes. She did not care *what* Donna Laura wanted to talk about; she wanted to be let alone.

“I have been a good deal with Sappho during your illness,” Donna Laura went on, disregarding her hostess’s rudeness, “and there are things I wish to discuss with you.”

Milly turned over, a little red spot on each cheek. “I cannot talk now,” she said suddenly piteous, “really I can’t, Donna Laura, I get feverish every night—you can see for yourself.”

“There are,” Donna Laura observed, with sententiousness, “worse things than a few points of fever. It’s about

the baby I wish to tell you—the baby and Sappho. Sappho adores the baby, signora.”

In the electric light her bony face looked longer and more like a horse's than ever, Milly thought, and there was a deep, dull glow in her cavernous eyes that looked to the sick woman not quite normal.

“I know, Donna Laura, I know. But when she has known for a few weeks of poor Nino's death—she has known now for over two—I shall have to tell her about the baby, and she'll just *have* to bear it. I can't let her go on thinking he's her baby, and—and letting Sir Bartle Sandys give him money under a mistaken impression—so as soon as I'm strong I'll tell her, and as I said, she'll just *have* to bear it.”

Donna Laura took her rosary, a worn old one of mother o' pearl, from her pocket and sat fingering it in silence for a moment. Then she said slowly, “But—she *couldn't* bear it. You have not seen much of her of late, but I have been with her every day. She has borne up under the shock of Nino's death for two reasons, signora. Firstly, he died six months before she knew it, and for some reason I can't explain, though Don Gaetano says it's natural, that seems to have made it easier; and secondly, because she believes that Nino lives in Ninetto.”

“I know; but she cannot be allowed to go on thinking that.”

“Why not?” asked Donna Laura simply.

Mrs. Roper gasped, “*You* ask that? You, who spend all your time praying? Why, Donna Laura, I'm not pious, and yet it's as plain as a pikestaff to me that it just isn't commonly honest!”

She sat up in bed as she spoke, and Donna Laura looked

with extreme disapproval at her pretty, low-necked night-gown.

There was a pause which both women broke at once, but Donna Laura's harsh voice overrode Mrs. Roper's weak one. "The whole situation isn't 'common,'" she said heavily, "and uncommon complications need uncommon cures."

"But—you don't mean to say you'd let Sir Bartle go on giving that immense income to Domenico and Jeanne's child under the impression that he is Nino's and Sappho's.

"He wanted to benefit a Gamba; he is benefiting all the Gambas who ever have lived and who ever will live. If—if anything happened to Ninetto, my husband's brother would inherit, and after him the Gamba-Gallenga—cousins of my husband. They have three sons and would carry on the name, in a way."

"My God," said Mrs. Roper slowly, "have you gone mad? Ninetto isn't a Gamba at all!"

She was shocked to the depths of her being.

Donna Laura twisted her rosary round her gaunt yellow hands and watched her. "You brought Ninetto here," she said at length, "not I."

"But—it was to save my daughter's life, and it *did* save it. And it was only for a short time. I—you—my goodness, how *can* you consider such a thing?"

"I am," Donna Laura answered in a commonplace voice, "replenishing the palace. I am buying back all the treasures that had been sold. By the time Ninetto is grown, it will be one of the finest palaces in Italy."

"But—but it's stealing," Mrs. Roper cried in sudden desperation.

Donna Laura smiled, her straight lips drawing back

and showing immense yellow teeth. Mrs. Roper realized that she had never seen those teeth before. "Your daughter," Donna Laura answered, "will go mad if she learns that Ninetto is not her child. She is nearly mad already."

"That is not true. It's a lie."

Mrs. Roper sprang out of bed and began to put on her dressing-gown. "It is *you* who are mad—or a criminal. I will send Carolina down for Sir Bartle and tell him at once. At once, do you hear?"

Donna Laura laughed again, the ghostly laugh that made her look like a death's head. "Sir Bartle left for England an hour ago with Signor Bruce. You were asleep."

"Left for England!"

"Yes. His sister Miss Sandys is very ill, and they cabled for him. Get back into bed, signora, or you will catch cold and have a relapse."

Mrs. Roper obeyed, for she was shaking from head to foot, and all her courage had suddenly left her.

Donna Laura tucked the bed-clothes round her very gently and patted her shoulder.

"Once you said, signora, that I adored my son, and that you adored your daughter. It was the wrong word, for I adore only God, but it was true that next to God I loved my son. Now I have lost my son and you still have your daughter. I have lost my son's son, too. I have nothing left but the family, the name. As long as I live I will work for the House of Gamba." Her voice failed, she went on in a lower tone, "The palazzo will be—one of the finest in Italy—one of the finest—"

After a few minutes she went away, closing the door softly behind her.

When she was stronger Milly tried to write to Sir Bartle, but the task proved to be too much for her. She simply could not finish the letter. A telegram came to Sappho from Bruce saying that his aunt had died a day or two after their arrival, and a letter from Bruce to Milly reminded her that the old lady who had died was, barring the writer himself, Sir Bartle's last relation in the world. "The poor old man is feeling very lonely," Bruce went on, "and is longing to get back to Sappho and the baby. It is pathetic to hear him planning about Ninetto's future——"

Mrs. Roper groaned aloud as she read. Everything seemed to be playing into Donna Laura's hands. The baby had had a slight illness, and Sappho's anxiety had, it seemed to her mother, really almost overstepped the bounds of sanity. Avellini had shaken his head seriously over it, and asked Mrs. Roper in a roundabout, would-be careless way, if there had ever been madness in her husband's or her own family.

"You don't mean——" she asked, unable to finish the phrase. The doctor shook his head.

"Oh, no, cara signora, of course not, but—the signora marchesa is very nervous, and I thank God the child is better."

No proverb, perhaps, is truer than the depressing one that declares that it never rains without pouring. Mrs. Roper had enough to worry over with her daughter's morbid condition, what seemed to her Donna Laura's insanity, and poor Sir Bartle's new grief that seemed to make it so cruel to disillusion him about Ninetto, but

the day she came in after her first drive, she walked wearily upstairs to meet a new trouble.

Don Ottavio was in her drawing-room, and at once asked, with every possible regret and excuse, but unmistakeable firmness, for an immediate loan of ten thousand lire.

“I haven’t ten *thousand* lire in the bank at this moment,” she said faintly, sitting down and taking off her furs.

“No doubt, no doubt, *cara signora*,” the old man agreed with a pleasant air, “but—you have means of obtaining it.”

“I never borrowed a cent in my life,” she answered with perfect truth.

“Not for yourself, no, but for a friend—almost a relation—a poor old man of over seventy?”

“Why on earth,” she counter-questioned, “do you come to *me*?”

Don Ottavio, whose black clothes looked shabby, shrugged his padded shoulders. “*Cara Donna Milly*,” he said, “for the best of reasons. My sister-in-law has grossly insulted me—I think her brain is affected by too much prayer and by her poor son’s death—and I cannot lower my dignity by approaching her again. You I regard as a kind woman as well as a happy one. Your charming daughter lives, and”—he paused, his withered old tongue darting swiftly across his lips as if he had been a lizard,—“you have your dear little grandson to love.”

Mrs. Roper was very weak still, and her drive had tired her, but she was no coward. She rose.

“I *thought* that was it,” she said sharply. “Blackmail. Well, you get out of my rooms at once. Go and do your

worst. Sir Bartle is coming back on Thursday, and I am going to tell him all about the baby, to prevent Donna Laura spending any more of his money on false pretences. I don't know whether she's mad, but if she isn't, she's thoroughly dishonest, and Sir Bartle is going to *know*. As to my daughter, if you go and tell her about the baby, you'll probably kill her, but you won't get one penny of money. We Spriggses and Ropers haven't any 'family,' but we're honest people, and if you think my daughter would pay you to keep quiet—well, that's where you drop your molasses jug!"

Don Ottavio stared.

"You wrong me," he stammered after a pause, "you—w-wrong me——"

"I don't wrong you. You are a disgusting old man and a blackmailer. *Get out.*"

When he had gone Mrs. Roper cried, and Carolina made coffee for her, and put on her lamb's wool-lined slippers, and her dressing-gown, and wanted to go for Sappho.

But Milly didn't want Sappho. She was lonely, and tired out, and dispirited, but she was brave underneath, and by dinner-time she had recovered her spirits and was chuckling over the thought of poor Don Ottavio's rueful exit.

Later, as she lay in bed, listening to the wind howl round the house, she told herself without sentimentality that she was growing old. "That's it," she said, "I can make myself *look* young, and my figure's younger than Sappho's, but I'm nearly forty-eight, and that's old, and I suppose my nerves are tired out. *Gosh*," she whispered, under the edge of her sheet, "I almost wish I'd married

one of those fellows a few years ago. It *would* be nice to be taken care of a little."

Metaphorically speaking, the downpour that was beating Milly Roper to the earth showed no signs of ceasing. Ninetto failed to recover satisfactorily, and Sappho grew worn and strange as she nursed him; Donna Laura continued, despite Mrs. Roper's threats to cable Sir Bartle, to buy splendid and expensive furniture and hangings for the palace. She was negotiating for the Cellini vase, and she had gone to Rome and spent an immense sum on brocade hangings for various rooms in the palace. She was rarely at home, and, when she was, passed most of her time at prayer in the chapel.

Mrs. Roper and she had several violent disputes about the matter of the money, and Donna Laura knew that nothing could prevent Mrs. Roper's telling Sir Bartle the truth about the baby. "I can see you are going to tell him—oh, yes," she said once, "that's why I am buying, buying all the time. I know Sir Bartle and he would not dream of taking away the things I have bought."

"He could have you put in prison."

"Perhaps. The law is a senseless thing. But—he *won't*. And he'll hate you," she added, with what Milly felt to be a flash of intuition, "for destroying the one pleasure he has left—the pleasure of planning for Nino's son. Poor old man!"

Sir Bartle did not reach Naples until nearly the end of February, and he was so overjoyed to be back, so delighted to see Sappho and the baby, who crowed and waved his arms at him, to his immense pride, that Mrs. Roper felt a perfect brute as she planned how she could best enlighten him.

By chance, Donna Laura, as well as Milly, was in Sappho's salotto when the old man came in leaning on Parker's arm, and at his first exclamation, "By Jove! he is growing like Nino," the old woman flashed a look of almost malignant triumph at the younger.

"Yes, isn't he," Sappho said happily. "Oh, Uncle Bartle, I *do* believe he remembers you!"

Mrs. Roper made tea, feeling as miserable as she had ever felt in her life. The situation seemed to her to be almost unbearable, for Sappho looked worn out and nervous, her face only relaxing when the child crowed or showed some sign of vigour, which it rarely did, having acquired a large-headed, egg-shell look that sent Milly's heart into her boots.

"Well, Donna Laura," Sir Bartle asked, after a while, as he sat with Ninetto in his lap, "did you get back that vase by the Florentine chap?"

"Yes, Sir Bartle. Cardinal Baretti managed it for me. You must see it. I also have some wonderful brocades, and two of the finest chairs—green brocade and gilt—that Scarpini says he ever saw."

Scarpini was an expert of undoubted knowledge and good faith, and Sir Bartle was pleased.

"You're going to have *some* palace, young man, as the Americans say," he laughed to the baby. "My poor wife would be delighted, Donna Laura, if she could know of what you are doing with her brother's legacy."

Donna Laura looked at Mrs. Roper, but said nothing, and Mrs. Roper poured out the tea in unbroken silence.

Of course, she told herself the next day, Sir Bartle, who had looked so much better, before he went to England, *would* have grown old and decrepit, so that telling him

would be doubly hard for her. Also Bruce *would* have stayed in England, just when she needed a friend and adviser. "I just wonder," she thought with a kind of general vindictiveness, "what will happen next?"

For several weeks nothing happened, except that Sir Bartle was not well, and was forbidden all excitement. He was not dangerously ill, Avellini told Mrs. Roper, but the cold he had caught at his sister's funeral had done him no good, and his arteries were not so elastic as they had been, so that he had better have no upsetting news or letters.

Mrs. Roper tooks walks every day, both to get stronger and to keep away from the palace where everything so exasperated her. She was even irritated by Sappho's behaviour over the baby's continued delicacy. She, Milly, had lost two babies, but she had behaved like a rational woman in her grief. Sappho lived like a woman in a dream, in two rooms full of photographs, paintings and other souvenirs of her dead husband, and almost literally counting the very breaths the baby drew. "What would you do," her mother asked her one day, driven beyond endurance, "if your baby died as my *two* did?"

Sappho's face turned a green grey, and she caught at the back of a chair. "Don't," she said sharply.

"No, but what *would* you do? It's a thing that happens every day."

"Mother," Sappho answered after a long pause, "I can't help being different from you. I only had you and Nino and Ninetto, and Nino was taken from me. I bore that, because I had Ninetto, and Ninetto is Nino.

But if he went—I—don't know, I only know I couldn't bear it."

"What if I said to her," her mother thought as an hour later she walked up a steep country road at the back of the town, "what if I said, 'Ninetto isn't Nino, Ninetto is Domenico'?"

Sappho felt her mother's irrepressible impatience over her demeanour towards the child, and Milly had the added pain of seeing her daughter turn more and more for sympathy to her mother-in-law.

Donna Laura, as the palace blossomed under her efforts, seemed to confuse the restored glory of the old house with the person of the baby. Having avoided the child for the first months of its life, she now became devoted to it, and seemed to share Sappho's anxiety as fully as she could have done had it been her real grandson. Sometimes Mrs. Roper wondered if Don Ottavio had been right; if the old woman's brain was affected.

She herself was only holding her hand until Avellini told her she might have a serious business talk with Sir Bartle, but she could see that Donna Laura could not understand this. Donna Laura, it was plain, regarded her battle as practically won, and, as evidently, gave Mrs. Roper no credit for motives any higher than her own for continuing to deceive the old Englishman.

"He is *very* rich," she made a point of saying whenever she could do so with any appearance of appositeness, "he could give away hundreds of thousands without missing them."

And there was, as she said this, always a veiled look of triumph in her eyes.

Mrs. Roper hated her at times, and regarded her as an

ordinary criminal, but there were other times when she could feel only pity for the old woman.

One evening in April Sappho asked her mother, who was dining with some American friends at one of the big hotels, to call Donna Laura before she went.

Mrs. Roper wrapped round herself a dark cloth cloak that hid her evening dress, knocked at Donna Laura's drawing-room, and getting no answer, went in. The room had been dismal before; now there was something almost horrible in its lack of coherence. Three paintings, the Carraciolo and two portraits of great value, hung on the lead-coloured walls, one or two noble brocaded chairs stood in the middle of the floor as if they had not yet found permanent places, and two fifteenth century Persian carpets, one of the famous pineapple design, hung over some of the old chairs as if for inspection.

A Coromandel screen of great beauty leaned against one wall, and on the various chests and tables stood a variety of iridescent Venetian glass vases, bowls and dishes, all, even to Mrs. Roper's uninstructed eyes, of great age and value. The room was like a curiosity shop.

Donna Laura was not there, but when Mrs. Roper had knocked at the bedroom door a muffled voice cried *avanti*, and Mrs. Roper went in quietly.

Donna Laura was kneeling by her bed, on the violet silk coverlet of which lay an odd collection of small objects that Mrs. Roper could not at first distinguish.

"Go away, Marietta," Donna Laura murmured without looking round, "I wish to be alone."

Then Milly saw what the things were before which the old woman was kneeling and weeping. Little broken toys, old bright-coloured books, two small velvet suits, a child's

sword, blocks with big letters on them, a painted wooden horse.

"Oh Dio," lamented Donna Laura. "Oh Dio, Oh Dio, how can I live, how can I live? Nino, Nino, mio, *where are you?*"

Mrs. Roper opened the door softly and went out, her eyes full of tears. *Where was he?* That was the question the old woman was asking over his poor little toys. *Where was he?*

Humbly, as her cab bore her to the hotel, the little woman owned to herself that she had no right to judge Donna Laura or her daughter. "I *couldn't* feel like that," she told herself truthfully, half ashamed. "I am the 'getting over' kind, and they are not."

She did not value her own bravery, for brave people always consider courage just part of the day's work, as little to their credit as curly hair or height, and she felt very humble as she recalled the pitiful scene she had witnessed.

"Poor Donna Laura," she thought truthfully, "if it was *my* money or Sappho's, Heaven knows I wouldn't grudge it to her."

CHAPTER IV

SIR BARTLE SANDYS was only sixty, but a man is as old as his arteries, and a very slight stroke that May brought everyone concerned with him face to face with the fact that he was practically seventy. Dr. Avellini called a big Roman specialist in as consultant, and later, Mrs. Roper persuaded Sir Bartle to see her very clever American doctor, Robert Rivers. All these three were cheery enough in their diagnoses, but they all agreed on one point; that the invalid must have no disturbing news of any kind. "If England sinks, you keep it dark, Mrs. Roper," Dr. Rivers said. "No reason why he shouldn't live on quite a while if he's not worried, but brittle arteries and worry don't get on well together."

Milly felt that the whole world, and even God Himself, were against her. Donna Laura prayed and prayed, but she also bought and bought, and Sir Bartle, now confined almost wholly to the house, listened with the deepest interest to her accounts of her purchases and her plans.

"That little boy's going to have a pretty fine house to live in," he would say, rubbing his hands and nodding his head. "He'll have to make a fine marriage, too, when the time comes. How pleased my poor Violet would be!"

Sappho sat by him every afternoon, the baby in her arms, happier with the old man than anywhere else, for he never said that Ninetto looked delicate, or seemed to have the slightest doubt of the child's growing to manhood. Sappho's health grew better in the spring, and when the

move was made to the villa, at the beginning of May, Mrs. Roper did not go with them.

It seemed to her that she simply could not endure life under the same roof with Donna Laura, Sir Bartle and the innocent impostor of a baby another day. She was tired to the depths of her soul, and knew that she not only wished for, but needed, an absolute change.

So when some American friends asked her to go to London with them for the season, she agreed at once, and mid-May found her settled with Mr. and Mrs. Holt in a tiny house in Hertford Street, Park Lane.

They had spent a few days in Paris on their way, and bought some clothes, and Mrs. Roper, after a week or so of London, began to feel younger than she had felt for years.

Mrs. Holt was of no social importance in New York, so she naturally did not know many people in London, but she was a pretty, amusing woman with a large, bald, fairly rich husband, and the little party enjoyed itself very much indeed.

Mrs. Roper's decided opinions about everything amused her new English acquaintances very much, and it delighted them to ask her how she liked various people, or things, and get her unhesitating, downright answers.

"George Robey? He makes me yawn till I cry," she used to say. "Vulgar without being funny, and *oh*, his way of looking '*Here I am, now hold your sides!*'!"

Or, "Harry Lauder? Well, I'd climb over tables and chairs any day to hear *him*."

She herself spoke the American of the middle west in the 'eighties, and had never modified her vocabulary in any way, but she was, as one of her English admirers used

to say, "down like a ton of bricks" on one of the prettiest of English actresses because that young lady could not say "Oh." "I daon't knaoow what yew mean," she would mimic, not at all badly, "that's how she talks, and it's dreadful!"

She greatly enjoyed the Academy pictures, and wept over one that had excited much righteous wrath amongst art critics; she left a ballad concert in its very middle because the songs were so idiotic, but she went to sleep at an excellent interpretation of "Also Sprach Zarathustra." She horrified a group of loyal, middle-class snobs by declaring a certain much-lauded aristocratic beauty to be "a pie-faced girl with nose like a button mushroom."

In short, she proved herself to be a mixture of good and bad taste, in which she differed from most people only in the frankness and courage of her convictions.

She thought London girls lovely, and nearly wept over their Doric legs in light-coloured stockings.

"And as for the *men*," she confided to someone, "they just look too good to be true. I could fall in love with them all."

Of course, being what she was, she confused articulateness with intelligence, and shyness with stupidity, but because she was honest and unafraid people liked her.

"*My*," she said once to Mr. Holt, "I've had a shock!"

"What was it?" he asked, smiling.

"I was in a shop, and I heard a girl say, looking at *me*. 'She must have been pretty when she was young!'"

And it *had* been a shock to her, though she had accepted her suddenly arrived middle-age with philosophy, and never did more to her face than touch up her eyebrows a

little and redden her lips delicately. "These old English women seem to paint with a *trowel*," she said once. "I guess no one ought to paint once she's past twenty!"

She heard Ellen Terry recite at a charity *matinee*, and made a rather wise remark about her afterwards. "I don't know much about genius," she said thoughtfully, "but it's *that* that she's got, and she's the *queenliest* woman I ever came across, and you just can't help loving her. She just *draws* you. I'd rather make my bow to her than to the Queen any day."

The Holts took her to dinners at restaurants, and to one or two private houses, to plays, to exhibitions of pictures, to the opera. Beyond these things she saw much, for she loved Dickens, and wandered about on foot looking for places he had named. Mr. Tulkinghorn's house in Lincoln's Inn Fields she discovered by the aid of a friendly little barrister, whose wig thrilled her to the marrow, and though she had never been able to "get through" a word written by Dr. Johnson, she spent a very happy rainy afternoon in his house off Field Street. She had, in short, though not much education, a keen sense of period, and the kind of imagination that gives one the feel of other places and other times.

It was an immense rest and relief to her to be far from Naples. So long as she was forbidden by the doctor to agitate Sir Bartle and Sappho in any way, her looking on at Donna Laura's amazing spending of the old man's money could not do any good, and it caused her almost unbearable pain.

It had grown, during the last months, to seem as if Sappho and she were cheating the kind, affectionate old man. And until she could tell Sappho the truth about

the baby she felt that she could no longer look on at the young woman's adoration of the guiltless little interloper.

In short, things had, because of her inability to change them, grown to be more than she could stand, and she knew that her instinct to leave it all for a while had been prompted not by cowardice but by wisdom.

It had been sensible and sane of her to come to England, and she knew it, and rejoiced in everything new that she saw. How she slept, too, in her tiny room, and how good the English food seemed to her!

One day late in July she ran into Charles Bruce in Hatchards'—a place full of romance and delight to her, because of its indefinable atmosphere of durability and historic memories.

"Good gracious, Mr. Bruce," she cried delightedly, "it's you!"

Bruce had heard though his uncle of her being in London, though Sir Bartle had not sent him her address, and they walked down Piccadilly together, Bruce bending over to listen to her excited chatter that was so inoffensive because it was so impersonal.

"Do you know Lady Barlow? Or the Impingtons? Or Viscount and Viscountess Wapping? No?" she asked, adding with simple disappointment, "I guess they're the swellest friends they've got."

"Good Lord," said Bruce, laughing, "I'm not a swell!"

"Of course you are. You're Sir Bartle's nephew."

"Uncle Bartle isn't a swell. His uncle was a ship-owner. How—how are Sappho and the baby?" He laughed again as they turned into the park. "I must say, Mrs. Roper," he went on in his pleasant musical voice, "you don't look much like a grandmother."

Suddenly she stood still. It was he she had wanted all the time. A friend. Someone to whom she could tell the truth. She was sick to death of lies and deceit, so sick that she could no longer stand them.

“A grandmother?” she repeated abruptly, in an unusual, hoarse voice. “Well, I’m *not* one!”

Bruce stared at her. “No,” she went on, “I’m not, Mr. Bruce, and if you don’t mind our sitting down on two of these bony-looking green chairs, I’ll tell you all about it.”

They sat down in the shade, and Bruce listened with a queer feeling of unreality to the melodramatic story she told him in such thoroughly unmelodramatic language.

“Aren’t we a nice lot?” she added, when she had finished her narration. “My, isn’t it just like a story by Laura J. Libby?”

“I don’t see,” he answered slowly, “how you could have done anything else, Mrs. Roper, and—and I’m *very* sorry for you.”

They sat for an hour discussing the situation from every conceivable point of view, and when at last Big Ben struck one, and Milly rose, saying she must be getting home to lunch, Bruce felt that ever since he had known her he had unconsciously done her far less than justice.

“As to the money,” he said, as they crossed Park Lane, “I shouldn’t worry about that. My uncle is too ill to be bothered, Sappho needs peace of mind, and as to poor Donna Laura, it’s quite plain that she is a little mad.”

“I suppose you mean crazy? Well, sometimes I think it’s that, and sometimes I think it’s just that she loves spending the money. It’s pretty awful, though, the

palazzo nowadays," she added thoughtfully, "her head's queer any way you look at her, and poor Bartle's in danger of another stroke, and, of course, that'll affect *his* brain, and then"—her voice trembled a little—"Sappho is certainly very queer about—the baby."

"Poor girl!"

"Yes, isn't it a pity? She writes me such happy letters now, because he—Ninetto's—better, but—they make me cry, somehow—it all seems so unreal. To think that poor Nino's been dead over a year!"

Bruce was silent for a moment, as they went round the corner of Hertford Street, and then he said: "Mrs. Roper, one confidence deserves another. I was thinking of going to Naples for the winter to see—to see if I'd have a chance with your daughter. Do you think I ever should?"

Milly shook her head. "No, I don't. I think Sappho was born to be an inconsolable widow! I'd bet my last cent that she'd not marry again if she lived to be a hundred."

"I see. And I think you're right, and I won't go. There's no use in making myself unnecessarily miserable."

They had reached the Holt's little house, and stood still. "My," Mrs. Roper said, with a firm grasp of his big hand, "I just wish she *would* marry you—but she wouldn't. Well, you think it all over, then; will you? About the baby and the money I mean, and then advise me."

"I will, but—it's a deuced hard thing to make up one's mind about—"

Two days later she had a note from Bruce, telling her that he had had a cablegram from Parker saying that Sir

Bartle had had a very bad stroke. "I am leaving for Naples," he said, "and will write to you from there."

Milly sat for a long time in her bedroom that afternoon, thinking things over. "He's Bartle's heir," she said, "and if Bartle dies he'll insist on the money going on as usual to Donna Laura, for Sappho's sake. That's bad enough, but I shouldn't mind it so much, but—Sappho's *got* to know about the baby, as soon as she gets over the shock of Bartle's illness—or death. Oh dear, poor Sappho always seems to be getting over some shock or other."

A telegram came from Bruce three days later announcing Sir Bartle's death and advising her to come to Sappho.

"Hasn't she got her mother-in-law with her?" asked Mrs. Holt, displeased at losing her agreeable guest.

Milly laughed. "You just ought to *see* the marchesa," she answered, adding softly, as she began to pack: "Gosh!"

The funeral was over when Mrs. Roper reached Naples, for through a slight railway accident she had missed her connexion in Paris and had to wait twelve hours.

Sir Bartle had been temporarily buried at Posilippo, pending the removal of the body to England in the autumn, and the people in the villa had settled down once more to their ordinary quiet life.

Mrs. Roper arrived at the villa at about eight in the evening, and found Charles Bruce reading one of E. V. Lucas's delightful books aloud to Sappho, who was sewing.

"Oh, my darling, my baby!" Milly kissed her child over and over again, touched to the heart by the girl's unfeigned joy at seeing her.

"Oh, *mother*, I've missed you so. Oh, I *am* so glad you've come back," Sappho kept saying.

She looked more like her old self, her mother thought, for her hair had grown and was pinned close to her head, and she wore a dove-coloured gown with lawn collars and cuffs. "Ninetto seems to hate black," she explained, noticing Milly's look of surprise, "so both Donna Laura—she went to Perugia this afternoon—and I began wearing grey before Uncle Bartle died. Oh, mother, *isn't* it sad that he's gone, dear old man?"

She cried a little as she told her mother about Sir Bartle's illness and death, but her grief was a normal, untempestuous one, and in spite of the pallor natural to the circumstances, she seemed better, her mother thought, than she had been since Nino's death.

They went into the big, cool dining-room, now handsomely furnished and hung with beautiful old, silver-grey brocade, and Milly had some food at one end of the long table.

"This is all different," she said, looking round as Sappho piled her plate with salad.

"Yes Donna Laura and Uncle Bartle bought the hangings at the Castelvecchio sale. Aren't they lovely? Dear Uncle Bartle did so love making things beautiful for Ninetto. Oh, mother," she broke off, with a lovely gesture of her hands, "he can almost walk!"

Bruce and Mrs. Roper looked at each other, and in his eyes she read the resolution she had known he would come to. Nothing was to be told that could ever dim the girl's happiness in the baby she believed to be hers. What a fight there would be about that!

Milly was tired from her journey, but they sat for a

while near the open drawing-room windows, listening to the nightingales in the dark recesses of the garden, and talking affectionately of the old man who was gone. He seemed to Milly almost as old as he seemed to Sappho; she was unable to recall him as the lover of that time in Paris. He was old, old and dead.

"We've tried to persuade Mr Bruce to stay on for a while," Sappho said, "but he is in a great hurry to get back to England."

"I have a good deal of work before me," Bruce answered quietly, but Mrs. Roper knew that he would never come again. She was sorry, but she saw that he was right. Sappho would never care for him; she would never care for anyone but her mother and Ninetto.

"He's going to beg me not to tell her about Ninetto," Milly thought, "but I will tell. She can adopt him if she wants to, and no one else need be told, but *she* must know. She won't like it, but she'll just have to grin and bear it."

She was right. The next morning Bruce asked her to take a walk with him, and as soon as they were out of the house she said decidedly: "Now don't ask me to promise not to tell about Ninetto, for I *won't* promise. I can't."

"What good would it be to tell? She adores the child and is happy."

"People mustn't be happy through lies."

"But——"

"No, Mr. Bruce, it's awfully good of you, and I'm sorry to refuse you anything, because I like you, but I can't promise to let my daughter go through life believing what isn't true."

Bruce flushed, for he was angry. "If I don't mind—and God knows I don't—I can't see why *you* should."

"Of course you can't. She's not your child. Why, Mr. Bruce, Sappho's the most truthful girl that ever lived. I never knew such a good girl. It's *wronging* her to let her build her whole life on something than isn't true."

"You'll break her heart," he retorted shortly; and she laughed.

"Nonsense! She'll hate it, of course, but she'll get used to it, and if her love for Ninetto can't stand the truth about him, why then her love isn't worth a row of beans!"

Finally Bruce gave in, trying to content himself with her promise to wait until the child was a full year old.

"All right—that's only two months off, and I can wait. And you must make up your mind to one thing," she added, more gently, "she won't go on taking that money."

"She's never had a penny of my uncle's money, and she will not be asked to have a penny of mine. The money was given to Donna Laura in trust for the child, and that, you'll excuse my saying, has nothing whatever to do with *you*, Mrs. Roper!"

He was angry, but at the last moment he relented and shook hands with her in a very friendly way, and asked her to write to him sometimes.

He left the next day, and Mrs. Roper and Sappho settled down into a very quiet life, Donna Laura, to Mrs. Roper's relief, still being absent.

"How do you think Ninetto looks?" Sappho asked her mother the first morning they were alone. Milly looked for several minutes at the child who was sitting quietly on a carpet, staring at her with inky, heavily-

lashed eyes. "He has grown," she said slowly at last, "but isn't he a little pale?"

"Nino never had any colour," Sappho retorted with a touch of impatience, and her mother reflected with a sensation of relief that Domenico, as well, had been, though apparently healthy enough, of that odd, old ivory complexion.

Ninetto's head was now covered with thick black hair like fur, and looked a little too big for his body, but he ate and slept well, and crawled about the floor in a *blâsé* rather than a forceless way, as if he could have gone much faster had he wished to.

Sappho never left him. Every morning very early she took him into the shady part of the garden, and there they stayed till the sun pierced through the trees, and then, until five, they moved from room to room of the villa, seeking the coolness so necessary in that climate and season.

At six she took him for a drive in the big Itala limousine that Donna Laura had bought for their use, and at seven she bathed and put him to bed.

"Celestina has gone. She seemed to think he belonged to her," Sappho explained, a little spot of colour in either cheek, "so I got this nice old-fashioned woman, Amalia, who actually realizes that he is *mine!*"

A fortnight after Bruce's return to England he wrote to Mrs. Roper to say that his uncle had left a small legacy of £500 a year to her, and the bulk of his late wife's jewels to Sappho. The jewels arrived in August and gave Milly great pleasure, though Sappho showed but little interest in them.

"Odd that they should both be so good to us, isn't it, mother darling? I wonder why it was."

"They were peculiarly alone in the world, both of 'em," Milly answered absently. "Do you remember the day they came to call, and Leporello jumped at them?"

Sappho, who was trying on the rings, laughed. "Yes, and how he bit poor Domenico. I wonder what ever became of Domenico? Uncle Bartle and I were talking about him only a few weeks ago. He once wrote to Uncle Bartle and asked for money, he had been smashed up in a tram accident in Pisa, and was in hospital."

Mrs. Roper stirred uneasily. She hated to think of Domenico while Ninetto was lying in her daughter's arms.

"Uncle Bartle sent him some money," Sappho went on. "Oh, mother, what a kind, generous man he was!"

"He certainly was, pettie. Don't let Ninetto eat that button."

August and the first two weeks of September were crushingly hot, but the high rooms of the villa continued to be cool and pleasant, and the two women were very happy together. In Donna Laura's absence Mrs. Roper was able more or less to put the thought of the money out of her mind. It was, after all, Charles Bruce's business, she reflected, and there was still over a fortnight before Ninetto's birthday, and until then she had promised Bruce to say nothing to Sappho of the child's real parentage. Her greatest trouble these long, hot days was Sappho's pathetic insistence on Ninetto's likeness to Nino. "Isn't he like his papa when he waves his hands," she would say, proudly, or "do look at that smile, mother, it's Nino over again!"

Mrs. Roper saw not the slightest likeness in the child to anyone but Jeanne. Its nose was absurdly like Jeannne's, and while its pallor and big dark eyes were not unlike Domenico's, they were just as much like almost any southern Italian's.

She marvelled much over the force of imagination that made Sappho see in the little intruder any specific likeness to the Gamba, but she was glad of it. With Bruce she saw no harm in deluding the world at large about Nino's having left an heir. It was evident that the child was to have the money Sir Bartle had settled on him, and once Sappho knew the truth her mother would not insist on, or even advise, the public announcement of the dying out of the family.

It was nobody's business, after all, but Sappho's, but Sappho must know.

The three weeks after her return were very happy ones, as has been said; not since her marriage had Sappho been so like her old self, so lovable, so loving. Donna Laura's continued absence, too, was a source of real contentment to the little American.

The old woman wrote occasionally to her daughter-in-law; she was busy tracking some family jewels and a wonderful sideboard that had been sold by her husband's father, going from place to place, following up clue after clue, meeting now with success, now with disappointment, but never despairing.

"She's a wonderful old thing," Milly admitted reluctantly to herself. "Crazy as a loon, but fine, somehow."

And then, three days before Ninetto's birthday, the blow fell.

Donna Laura had returned by the evening train, and

after a long account of her wanderings and successes, said good night about half-past ten, and went up to bed.

Sappho, who had had a bad headache all day, dropped asleep on her sofa a few minutes later, and Milly, determined to let her sleep till she should wake naturally, tiptoed up to her own room for her sewing.

On her way downstairs she passed Sappho's room and seeing to her surprise a light inside, pushed the door open. Donna Laura stood, a lighted candle in her hand, gazing down into the beautiful inlaid cradle with the most awful expression of horror in her face that Mrs. Roper had ever seen in her life.

Unnoticed by the older woman, Mrs. Roper approached the cradle. The child was awake, playing with one of his narrow, pale little feet and smiling, his head on one side, his mouth crooked.

It was without a shadow of doubt Nino Gamba's smile. Milly saw, as if a veil had been lifted that the child's flat, well-shaped ears were Nino Gamba's ears, his hands Nino Gamba's hands, raising her eyes her gaze met Donna Laura's, and in a dreadful silence the two mothers-in-law stared at each other.

CHAPTER V.

DONNA LAURA had gone from the villa before nine o'clock the next morning, leaving a note for Sappho. Mrs. Roper, who found the note on a table in the passage outside her daughter's door, stood looking at it for some moments, and then took it to her room and sat down with it in her hand.

"She is crazy," she said slowly, in an undertone to herself, "or if she isn't crazy, she's pretty near it. She *saw*, last night, and it may have unbalanced her completely—poor soul. If she's told Sappho in this note it will half kill her, and I'm not going to have *that*."

It was a rainy morning, and a scent of long-parched, suddenly wet, earth came in through the window, together with the smell of coffee and frying olive oil, for the kitchen was on that side of the house.

Mrs. Roper looked vaguely round the big room, her thoughts entirely occupied with the black-edged envelope that lay in her lap. She saw, subconsciously, the stirring of the mosquito netting over the bed, the gleaming of the well-polished old chest of drawers, the tortoiseshell and silver dressing table things that poor Sir Bartle had given her for Christmas.

An ill-drawn, beautifully coloured fresco of Aurora driving her rosy car, decorated the ceiling, and one or two dark old paintings hung on the Nile-green walls. A pleasant room; yes, she liked her room; but—the letter? It was a dreadful thing to open another person's letter;

she had never in her life done such a thing, but—hadn't she the right to protect her daughter from the possibly ruthless revelation of a woman as near madness as Donna Laura? It was as if she saw Donna Laura creeping stealthily up behind Sappho, with a knife in her hand.

Finally she took a hatpin and opened the flap of the envelope with great care, ashamed yet resolute.

"Dear Sappho," the note said, written almost illegibly, "I find I must go to the palazzo for a day or two on business. I shall be back by Friday at the latest. Your affectionate Laura Gamba."

Because the note was harmless Mrs. Roper suddenly felt horribly guilty, and it was with a crimson face that she gummed the flap down again and laid the letter where she had found it.

Thank God Donna Laura had gone. Never, never could Milly forget the awful look in her face the night before, as she recognized the child for what he was.

Milly went out into the garden along the path to the rocks, and sitting down in a little Greek temple built a hundred years before by some romantic Gamba, tried to think things out.

She was conscious of no anger toward Nino. Jeanne had been a bad girl, after all, but Nino had been only a man, and with the clear sightedness common to her, she realized that in spite of his unfaithfulness to Sappho, it was only Sappho whom he had loved. Some man in a novel she had read had she remembered, been called by the author, youthful but not constant, —

So that was why Jeanne had looked so unhappy the last weeks of her stay in the palazzo! They had all thought it was Domenico. She remembered Nino's bad

humour the evening Jeanne had called to congratulate Sappho about her coming motherhood. Bad conscience. They were all alike, men. The minute they were ashamed they wanted the partner of their guilt to melt into thin air, if not to die,—

But Jeanne, how she had lied!

Milly plucked a small purple flower that had sprung up in a crack of the yellowed old marble floor, and pulled it slowly to pieces. She wished she knew all the ins and outs of the story—

Jeanne had basely maligned Domenico, unless—she gave a little shudder of disgust, and then shook her head.

“No, Jeanne suffered. She probably loved Domenico, and Master Nino, that time before Christmas, when he and Sappho quarreled about Donna Palmira’s doctor, just—ugh!”

She was sorry for Domenico, though he *had* been so hard. And poor Jeanne! But this new knowledge was, she felt, going to complicate matters enormously. This she could *never* tell Sappho, and suppose Donna Laura in her insane passion for the family should try to blackmail her into silence! “If you tell her the child isn’t hers, *I’ll* tell her he *is* Nino’s.” That sort of thing?

“I wish Mr. Bruce was here,” she thought, with a sudden flood of that horrid, tired, *old* feeling coming over her, as she walked slowly back to the villa.

But Donna Laura, who came home on Friday, not only did not threaten, she did not refer by so much as a glance to their new knowledge. She looked very broken and ill, and walked as if she were knee-deep in thickly-weeded water, but she assured Sappho that she was well, and went,

with one exception, through her days much as usual. She no longer talked about her purchases, past or future, she expressed no intention of making more journeys. Donna Laura had made her last contribution to the glory of Casa Gamba.

One day Mrs. Roper received a long letter from Charles Bruce, telling her that he had heard from Donna Laura. "She says," he wrote, in the small, scholarly hand that seemed to Milly so unlike a man's, "that she has decided not to buy anything more, and that she wishes to give up her trusteeship, because of her ill-health. What is the matter? I, of course, cannot force her to continue a task she feels to be too much for her, but there is more in it than meets the eye, and I am puzzled. I suppose I must instruct my solicitors to send the quarterly income to you, instead?"

He then told his news, in a concise way, and asked her to let him know how Sappho was. "I shall not see her again," he said, "for I quite see that my seeing her every day for twenty years would be useless, but I hope you will write to me sometimes."

Then he asked her to have a talk with Donna Laura and try to find out why she wished to withdraw from her hitherto so congenial position as trustee. "Her idea of putting the money that comes in during these first few years into furniture, etc., seemed to my uncle a very good one, I know," he wrote, "and I like the idea of his wishes being carried out,——"

That afternoon Mrs. Roper found Donna Laura sitting in a shady corner of the loggia, gazing out at the glittering sea, and sat down by her.

"I've had a letter from Mr. Bruce," she began at once, "and he is very sorry about what you wrote him."

Donna Laura did not stir, or speak, and after a moment Mrs. Roper went on. "He says that poor Sir Bartle was very much interested in—in all that you were doing for the palace, and he thinks it a pity that—that you should stop."

"I am going," Donna Laura answered harshly, "into a convent."

"A convent!"

"Yes. You know why. We will never talk of it again, signora, but *you know*. I adored my husband more than my God, and he was a scoundrel. I adored my son more than my God and all His saints, and—my son was a scoundrel. That is all."

She rose and stalked down the loggia, and Milly sat with tear-blinded eyes, smitten with a sense of the futility of sympathy. She had never liked Donna Laura, and of late she had almost feared her, but now she felt that up to that hour she had never known what pity was.

"If only there was something—*anything*—I could do for her," she thought, wiping her eyes, "any mortal thing."

And it so happened that within a week something occurred that gave her great hopes of being able a little to mitigate the old woman's misery.

She had gone into town to do some errands, and amongst other places where she had to go was a house in the poorer quarters of the town, where one of the kitchen maids had insisted on going, on being taken ill.

The girl was a stupid, faithful creature, who had cried herself into a fever at the idea of going to a hospital, and Sappho had finally sent her in a cab to her mother.

Mrs. Roper took her some fruit, sat with her for a while, and then started to do the rest of her errands on foot.

It was a pleasant October day, and the out-of-doors domestic life of the lower class Neapolitans had always interested her. She walked slowly, pleased at the expressions of admiration evolved by her pretty feet and graceful little figure. "I still look all right from *behind*," she thought, with perfect good humour, "and, thank goodness, I'll never be fat."

She walked round supine, sun-burnt men whose wives, filled with the spirit of the chase, were busily combing their oily black hair; she walked in the roadway to avoid the sprawling babies who, like ants, swarmed on the foot-way. She liked the smell of frying olive oil, of frying onions, she liked the velvety black of the cave-like charcoal shops, and the green-grocers' tiny shops with festoons of red peppers slung over the doors; she liked the drinking booths with their strong smell of the red wine that made the thick glasses oily; she liked the shameless open-air life of the dirty, happy-go-lucky, quick-tempered people whose beauty can still be traced back to the days when Neapolis was a Greek colony.

With her unconscious guilt of living in the present, she was thoroughly enjoying her walk, when a man burst out of a doorway, and nearly running into her, drew back to apologize, and revealed himself as Don Ottavio.

"Signora!"

"Don Ottavio!"

The last time she had seen him she had with justice called him a blackmailer and turned him out of her flat,

but he seemed to have forgotten this, and took off his greasy hat with a friendly flourish.

"I hope you are well?"

"Yes, thanks, I'm all right," she answered; "but you, Don Ottavio, you look ill."

Don Ottavio had fallen very low; he had fallen to that nethermost point when a well-born Italian can admit that he is hungry.

"I—I've not had much food lately," he said with a simplicity that almost approached dignity.

"Oh dear! I—I've been doing a lot of errands, and I'm awfully hungry, too—I had no lunch," she lied, "let's go and get some food."

Don Ottavio knew of a small trattoria where the food was excellent, and they went to it, the old man hobbling by her side with an attempt at swagger that struck her as pathetic.

His face had grown very small, the lines in it looked amazingly deep, as if they had been cut with a knife and filled with India ink. His clothes were almost in rags.

It was only six o'clock, and the little restaurant was empty. It was no more than fairly clean, but the host was a civil man, and promised to bring them some macaroni and some wine at once.

"Then we'll have veal cutlets and potatoes," Milly said, "with a salad."

Don Ottavio drew a deep breath, and leaning his elbows on the table looked across at her. "You are kind, signora," he began slowly, "and I am not ungrateful."

"Never mind that, Don Ottavio. Have you been ill?"

He hesitated. "Ill? I don't quite know. Very poor, very hungry, but ill—no, I think not. I have come within

two numbers of winning the first prize in the national lottery since I saw you—I had a wonderful dream, and played the numbers—but—I just missed.” He shrugged his shoulders, and she wondered how it could be that ragged, dirty, gone-under as he looked, there was still something about him that told one that he was a gentleman by birth.

She did not know that it was the ancient civilization of the Latins that makes a look of breeding survive almost any degradation.

When the macaroni had come, and he had eaten two great plates of them, twirling them round his fork, and dropping them like snakes into the dark cavern of his mouth, he drank a glass of the oily red wine and began to talk.

“Only last week, signora,” he said, his voice already softer, “I was speaking of you.”

“Who with?”

“With—someone you will hardly remember. Domenico Materassi, who used to be Sir Sandys’s servant.”

She stared. “I—I thought he went back to Pisa?”

“No—may I pour you out some wine? It is crude, but pure—a pure country wine. No, he has always been in Naples. For some reason he called himself a Pisan—possibly foreigners consider Tuscans more honest than Neapolitans—but he is a Neapolitan.”

Milly looked hard at him. “Jeanne told me he sent her money from Pisa, or from Florence.”

“Ah, si, si, Jeanne. A beautiful liar, Jeanne. He *did* give her money—he loved her, you see.”

Don Ottavio was now using a tooth-pick with many

flourishes, and when he had finished he stuck it in his bread and took another drink of wine.

Mrs. Roper frowned. "If he loved her really he would have married her," she said, pretending to eat.

Don Ottavio waited while the waiter set the beautifully browned cutlets before him, and a huge, thick platter of fried potatoes in front of Mrs. Roper.

"There are," he then said thoughtfully, "limits to what a man will do even for love,"—

The cutlets and potatoes were delicious, and even Mrs. Roper ate with enjoyment for several minutes, trying not to see the old man's toothpick.

Presently, as they ate their salad, she asked in an indifferent voice, "Did he say anything about—about the baby?"

"Yes. He said several things about the baby."

There was a pause, and then the old man went on. "Signora," he began, setting down his wine glass, "there is a story, and I'm going to tell it to you."

She nodded. "All right, do. Will you have a cigarette?"

He took one.

"First, Don Ottavio," she said slowly, "I want you to tell me how you knew about—about the baby."

He struck a match. "Ebbene. I was in that room at the end of the picture-gallery that night, and—I saw, through her window, my sister-in-law sitting with—something in her arms. It was—your daughter's dead baby, and Laura was crying over it. I never thought before," he added simply, "that she *could* cry."

"Well, go on."

He hesitated. "Oh, after that, I—I watched her carry

the baby back to the salotto—and I saw you come in with—the other one. It was perfectly simple.”

Then, when his cigarette was burning well, he went on: “Well, I wanted to make money out of my knowledge—I had had a wonderful dream, and should undoubtedly have won the gran premio in the lottery if I’d been able to buy the tickets, but—but I thought you were quite right to do what you did. After all, the baby is far better off, and besides people adopt children every day, and of course your chief wish was to keep your daughter alive and—sane.”

Mrs. Roper nodded and he went on. “My sister-in-law and you refused to—to pay me for keeping your secret, and, of course, I could not go to Donna Saffò. So—nothing happened. I saw Domenico once in a while—he is usually ill—lungs—and lives near the harbour with his mother, but he’s a silent man, and we rarely spoke of the past. He had been very hard hit over Jeanne’s death, but so far as I could see never regretted his refusal to marry her.”

Mrs. Roper took a sip of wine, for she felt weak, and feared what was coming. Of course, if Domenico knew that Ninetto was Nino’s son, who could blame him?

“But the other day,” Don Ottavio resumed, after a sharp look at her face, “the old Materessi came to me and asked me to go with her to see her son. I went—of course. Found him better, but very busy, as he was sailing for South America in a day or two. Some of his friends had got him a job out there somewhere, and he was full of excitement over it.

“He sent his mother out and, to cut a long story short,

he told me the whole Jeanne business from beginning to end."

Mrs. Roper did not move. Of course, now that he knew the child's real paternity, the old scoundrel would again try to blackmail her.

"It was like this. When he first went into Sir Sandys's service Jeanne was already there, and he fell in love with her. In our southern fashion, signora, not as northerners fall in love. Jeanne was very coquette, and at first Domenico misunderstood her. When he found out that she was a good girl, he did his best to persuade her to marry him. But—and this I ask you to notice carefully—she had, long before the wedding, seen my nephew in the passages and on the stairs, and while he took no notice of her—he already loved your daughter, signora—she had fallen in love with him.

"For a long time Domenico did not discover this, though the girl often cried, and he saw that she was unhappy and restless, but finally he came across Nino talking to her in the passage—that was a little time before Christmas,"—

"I know."

"Jeanne told him that my nephew was unhappy because he had quarrelled with his wife, and that she had offered to—well, in short, to unlock a certain door that Donna Saffò was just then locking every night."

"I know," Milly repeated, her lips stretched to a straight line.

"Domenico believed this, because that evening Jeanne took him upstairs and let him see her unlock the door, but—he scented a mystery and began to watch.

"The next night he met Nino coming down from the

top floor where Jeanne's room was. He is a soft-footed, shadowy kind of man, and Nino did not notice him, and he determined to wait and watch and catch them together. Then he meant, of course, to kill them both, and then himself."

"I see."

"But"—Don Ottavio leaned across the table and pointing a dirty, crooked finger at her, spoke with great deliberation—"he never caught them together, because they were never together again! My nephew and his wife made friends, he was probably horribly ashamed of himself, and never even spoke to Jeanne again. He had never cared a button for her, you see."

Milly remembered the day of the storm, when she had found Jeanne crying, and Domenico had refused to marry her. How clear it all was now! Poor little Jeanne.

"Jeanne admitted to Domenico, when he threatened to kill Nino, that it had been her fault entirely. Nino, it seems, never gave the girl a thought till he was so unhappy about Saf—Donna Saffo, and then she just deliberately seduced him. Which," Don Ottavio added thoughtfully, "happens more frequently than respectable women know, and has, on the man's side, nothing to do with sentiment."

"He—Domenico—might have forgiven the poor thing and married her," commented Mrs. Roper fiercely. "I don't care what she did, poor little devil, he might have forgiven her. She'd have lived if he had."

"Some men," commented Don Ottavio, with a certain dryness, "don't care for fathering other men's children."

There was a pause, during which the waiter brought

and poured out their coffee, and when he had gone, the old man resumed his story.

"Jeanne, it seems, had a very strong feeling for Donna Saffo, and her only fear, after the first, was that she might learn of Nino's unfaithfulness. She felt herself to have been horribly guilty towards—your daughter—too. I met her and she lied splendidly to me, and Domenico told me the first time I ran across him of her meeting and lying to you. He—Domenico—like everyone else, seems to have liked Donna Saffò, and it never occurred to him to tell *her*; but I had a very hard time to prevent his telling my sister-in-law."

"But—*why* did you prevent his doing that? *You*?"

Don Ottavio laughed. "Because she had refused to give me money, you mean? Cara signora, every man has his own standard, so even I have mine. I could not tell poor Laura—*that!* Well—when Jeanne died, the woman at whose house she had been staying, told Domenico that the child had died, too, and been buried with its mother."

"Why wasn't he at the funeral?"

"I told you his lungs were bad then, though they're better now. Well, just at that time he was in bed with pneumonia. Jeanne's death was nearly the end of him, though he had been too proud to marry her. When he was well he got a job as floor waiter at the Grand Hotel, and was there for a long time. He lost his job because the guests couldn't stand his gloomy face, and after trying various things he got this offer for South America. He sailed the day before yesterday."

"So that," Mrs. Roper said, "is all."

Don Ottavio glanced over his shoulder, and then leaned towards her across the little table. "All but one thing,"

he answered slowly, almost in a whisper. "It was Domenico who killed my nephew."

"Oh!"

"Yes. They met earlier in the evening, Domenico accused him of—about Jeanne—and Nino knocked him down. So he waited behind the pillars of Casa Baroncini, and when his friend had left Nino he—knifed him."

Mrs. Roper had a horrible fear that she was going to be sick, but she took a drink of wine and managed to recover herself.

"But—you," she stammered, after a moment, "how could you be friendly with him? Your own flesh and blood."

"I didn't know till months afterwards, and a scandal would have done no good.

"Besides, I thought he was dying. And," he added calmly, "Nino shouldn't have knocked him down."

A sudden vision of Bakersport, her old home in America, seemed for a moment to hang in the air before Mrs. Roper's eyes. The long, maple-lined streets with big grass-plots behind white picket fences, and gravel paths leading up to low, veranda'd wooden "porches" in the evenings, the men in their shirt-sleeves, the women in rocking chairs in "shirtwaists," while some of the youngsters "squirted the hose" over the grass, and others played banjos and guitars and sang college songs,——

There was a great peace about it, a comfortable simplicity; Naples seemed very sinister in comparison.

"I thought," Don Ottavio was saying, as the picture faded, "that I ought to tell you."

"Thanks. Only I knew."

"You knew!"

She nodded. "Yes—that the baby is Nino's—not about the murder—and so does poor Donna Laura. We—we just saw the resemblance one night. He's exactly like Nino."

"The family type is strong. And my sister-in-law," the old man asked, "how does she bear it? It must have been a terrible shock to her."

He looked sincerely sorry for Donna Laura, and Mrs. Roper felt that she had done him injustice in her thoughts.

"It has nearly killed her," she answered simply. "I don't think she will live long. She has given up the management of the baby's money, and I believe she is going into a convent."

There was a long pause, and then Mrs. Roper asked for the bill, paid it, and put on her gloves.

"I—I had a small legacy from Sir Bartle Sandys," she said, gathering her belongings together, "and if a little money would be of use to you, Don Ottavio——"

Don Ottavio fixed a mournful gaze on her. "As a gift," he said, "I will accept it gratefully. As a bribe not to tell what I know, it is unnecessary."

And Mrs. Roper knew that, incredible as it might seem, he was speaking the truth. She had her cheque book with her and her fountain-pen, and without saying any more, she drew a cheque for fifty pounds.

"I wish I could hope," she said, as he folded it and put it in his pocket, "that you would not spend it all on the lottery."

Don Ottavio rose. "Signora," he answered gravely, "I will not, though part of it will no doubt go that way. I know that I am shabby and dirty and revolting. I will buy some clothes, and have some baths, and eat one good

meal a day. For some months I have been nearly starving, and I'm an old man____"

They shook hands outside the door of the restaurant and separated. At the corner Milly turned and saw the old man still standing bare-headed in the sunset light.

In spite of his rascality, and his rags, there was, she thought, something graceful and almost courtly in his attitude.

"If we lived here all our lives," she told herself, hailing a cab, "we'd never get to understand them."

CHAPTER VI

THE next day, while Sappho was seeing the doctor about some ailment of the baby's, Mrs. Roper went to Donna Laura's room and, with an odd kind of fear, knocked.

She had never been in the old woman's room in the villa before, but Sappho had told her that it was full of newly-bought treasures of all kinds, so she was surprised to find that it now contained nothing but a bed, a table, a cheap-looking chest of drawers, and two rush-bottomed chairs. On the wall over the bed hung a huge and painfully realistic crucifix.

Milly closed the door. "I have something to tell you, Donna Laura," she said in a gentle voice, "something that may make you less unhappy."

"Nothing can make me less unhappy."

"But I think this can. It's about Nino."

"I don't wish to hear anything about any Gamba. Nino was a Gamba and they are all bad."

"Judge not that you be not judged," Milly quoted out of her very scant knowledge of scriptural sayings, and rather surprised at her own words.

"If your eye offend you," returned the other woman sombrely, "pluck it out."

Milly looked at her and was stabbed with pity. "Your eye, yes, Donna Laura," she said eagerly, clasping her hands, "but not your own child. It was the old Jewish God who said that, not—not"—she blushed furiously—"Jesus."

Never in her life had she felt so miserably shy, so clumsy, so absurd.

Donna Laura stared at her. "You were my son's mother-in-law," she said slowly, "and I am your daughter's, but we have never been friends."

"Perhaps not, for you are very good, and I am not, but—I was fond of Nino and—you are being unjust to him."

"I am *not*," cried the old woman with quiet, almost masculine fierceness.

"Yes," Milly repeated firmly, "you *are*. I know about—about your husband, and I can see that you think Nino was just like him, deceiving Sappho month in and month out, as the marchese deceived you. Well, you're not right to think so, for it's not true. Nino *wasn't* like that!"

"Ninetto is the child of *my son* and his wife's maid."

Milly flinched. "I know that, and it's—horrid. But if you'll let me talk without contradicting every word I say, I'll tell you how it happened."

And she told. Told the plain truth as she saw it, sparing neither Nino for his weakness, nor Sappho for the obstinacy that had, because his weakness was a part of him, driven him into Jeanne's net.

She told about Domenico's love for Jeanne, and Jeanne's overwhelming passion for Nino. "Nino didn't even *look* at her till the time when he and Sappho quarrelled about Donna Palmira's doctor—do you remember? I've been in the room with him and Jeanne together a thousand times, and I don't believe he even knew she was there. Donna Laura,"—she leaned forward and laid her hand on the old woman's stony knee—"Nino loved Sappho."

Donna Laura shook her head, less harshness, but as much misery as ever, in her face. "That is not love. If

he had loved her nothing could have made him faithless to her."

Mrs. Roper paused, reluctant as one is reluctant to destroy the illusion of a young girl. "You're wrong," she said slowly, "we're like that, but they aren't—*men*. I mean, except just the first few months. Besides it means so much less to them."

Donna Laura looked up at the bleeding Christ on the cross. "Thou shalt not commit adultery," she said sternly, and Milly drew a deep breath.

"That's what God said to Moses, isn't it?" she asked, not quite sure. "Of course, it's *wrong*, but—Jesus said not to throw stones."

As she spoke she noticed Nino's watch lying on the table by his mother's bed.

"You've stopped wearing his watch," she cried suddenly angry, "you've not forgiven him, and yet I suppose you say the Lord's Prayer every night—'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us!'"

Donna Laura's discoloured mouth moved convulsively, but she did not answer, and Milly rose.

"I thought," she said, "that you'd be *glad* to know that Nino wasn't so bad as you believed. It's *my* daughter he insulted, but I forgive him, and if I was a Roman Catholic I'd pray for him."

Then Donna Laura spoke slowly as if her tongue and lips were stiff. "I am going into a convent next week," she said, "and so long as I live, I shall do nothing but pray for him. I shall wear Our Lady out with prayers. She *must* hear. There is also something," she added,

suddenly vague, "that I must tell you, but not now, not now——"

Without another word she knelt down on the tessellated floor and began to pray, the worn beads of her old rosary slipping like lightning through her fingers.

Mrs. Roper went out and closed the door very quietly.

The baby was not well that night, and in the morning Dr. Avellini came to see him again. The little man was growing very fat, but still wore light-grey clothes, decorated himself with a yellow carnation, and waxed his grizzled moustaches into sharp points.

"I find nothing specifically wrong," he said, when he had examined the child, who lay limply in his mother's arms, "it is just as I have always told you yesterday, Signora Marchesa. He is constitutionally delicate, and needs great care. You might," he added, "try a change of climate."

Mrs. Roper glanced at him, a sharp gleam in her dark-blue eyes. That counsel sounded to her a menacing one. "Do you mean Algiers, for greater warmth?"

"No, signora, not necessarily. You might, on the contrary, see what Switzerland would do for him. I know a very good doctor in St. Moritz—an Italian—or there is an excellent German one who specializes in children's cases, at Silvaplana——"

"Why is he so—so languid?" Sappho asked, paying no attention to these remarks to her mother. "Just look how his hand drops when I let it go."

"He doesn't seem to assimilate his food," the doctor answered. "I hope the English preparation I have prescribed will prove more nourishing."

Mrs. Roper, under the pretext of putting her letters into the box in the hall, accompanied him downstairs.

"Doctor Avellini," she said, with the American abruptness so disconcerting to people of other nations, "what is the matter with—with Ninetto?"

Avellini stood still and pulled on his gloves. "I have told you, signora. The child is delicate—he must have great care."

"Yes, but is the great care going to do him any *good*?"

"Signora!" The doctor shrugged his shoulders, his arms outstretched, and raised his eyebrows.

"Is he going to die?" she persisted.

"One must always hope."

She dropped her letters through the slit in the polished mahogany box and opened the door. "What," she asked, looking up at him—for small though he was he was taller than she—"makes his head so big?"

Then Avellini told her the truth. The child showed, odd though it seemed, every symptom of pre-natal under-nourishment. "He is extremely weak, and there is a tendency to marasmus. If he was the child of poor parents I should say there was no hope of his being saved. Being the son of the Marchesa Gamba, with everything in his favour, I say—only to you, signora, as the grandmother—there is a *small* hope of his living." After a pause he went on, eyeing with professional approval the calmness of her face: "As it is, I should say that, *but for the mother*, that it might be the best thing possible if the poor little fellow *did* die!"

"But for the mother?" Mrs. Roper's face was suddenly drained of its delicate colour. "What do you mean?"

"Don't be alarmed, signora, I meant only—what I have known from the first, that the Signora Marchesa's feelings are—h'm—dangerously intense, and her nervous system dangerously highly strung."

"She is much stronger."

"Much. But I must warn you that, in case of any sudden shock, there would be a certain amount of danger of, let us say, melancholia. You remember the effect of your telling her of the marchese's death."

"Insanity, you mean."

"My apprehensions," he answered kindly, "carried out to their worst logical conclusion, *might* mean that, but—we can take many precautions. For instance, your daughter leads too retired, too *concentrated* a life. She is a very young woman and, speaking with deference, a beautiful one. Poor Don Giovanni has been dead nearly a year and a half, and my advice to you, signora, would be to take your daughter where she would see more people. Particularly," he added meaningfully, "more young men."

Mrs. Roper went slowly upstairs. The doctor was right, of course, but she knew how impossible, how useless his advice was. Even Bruce, who loved her, knew that Sappho would never marry again. And she had always avoided strangers and failed to make friends. "Oh, dear, if she was only just an ordinary American like me," her mother thought.

October was a fine month, and every day Sappho, her mother and Ninetto went for a long drive in the hills or along by the sea. The big motor was very comfortable, and when the child tired, as he very quickly did, they

laid him on pillows on the front seat, and covered him with the baby-lamb counterpane Sir Bartle had given him.

Sappho grew thin and worn-looking, but talked constantly of Ninetto's improvement.

"He is getting heavy, mother," she used to say. "I can hardly hold him."

Whenever the child roused for a moment out of its lethargy and looked at something they were passing, Sappho's delight and pride were unbounded. "Did you see him look at that sea-bird?" she would cry, or "just look, mother, it's that goat he's waving to!"

The English prepared food seemed at first to be more nourishing than the Italian kinds, but the effect soon wore off and the child again lost weight.

"He *does* look a little delicate," Sappho admitted when they came home at sunset, "but you *must* know how much he's like Nino."

"I do see it now, darling. His ears and his hands——"

"I've seen it from the very first! And so are his eyes. Do you remember the little sunflowers in Nino's eyes? Well—just look at Ninetto's now in this light!"

After a while she went on gently: "You mustn't think, darling, that I don't appreciate your staying here with us, for I do. I know you like people, and—and gaiety—and it's awfully good of you to give it all up to live here just with me."

"Sometimes I think we might invite some friends to stay at the villa once in a while," Milly said artfully. "Gemma and Giulio for instance, or the Cornelis, or the Jacksons. I confess I do like to see people around."

Sappho was silent for a moment, and then, holding her child very close to her breast, she answered: "I can't

bear that great lump of a baby of Gemma's and Giulio's—he's so noisy. And besides—oh, mother, I can bear not having Nino, when I'm all alone with Ninetto—and you, of course, too. Ninetto is so like him—I can't exactly explain it, but—he just *is* Nino. I feel when I sit like this that Nino is close beside us. It's that feeling that keeps my head clear. You remember when it *wasn't* clear? It used to get all confused and woolly, and I couldn't remember things. Well, do you know, I've never told you”—she took her mother's hand and kissed it—“but I think I very nearly went crazy that time, before Ninetto was born. I think my head isn't exactly like other heads, somehow, and it's baby, my own Ninetto, that keeps me—well.”

“Oh, Sappho, my little girl!”

“Don't be upset, mother. It's quite all right, because I *have* got him, and he's going to get strong and well, aren't you, Tesoro? But—I honestly think God made Ninetto so like Nino to—to help me live.”

Mrs. Roper could not speak. The gorgeous western sky, clear red and gold, looked to her as if covered with giant cobwebs, and wisps of fog. She turned her face away.

Sappho did not notice, for Ninetto had suddenly clutched at her brooch with an uncertain hand, and she was rapturous over his cleverness.

“Oh, you great, *rough* fellow,” she cried, kissing him.

At the end of October the Gambas went back to Naples, and the morning after their arrival Donna Laura left for her convent. For some time she had been busy at the palace, and the heart-broken Marietta at once told Milly and Sappho what her task had been.

"Oh, signora marchesa, oh, signora," the faithful old servant cried, wringing her hands, "my poor signora, my poor, *poor* mistress! She has been burning things for days; all the old signor marchese's things, his clothes, his books, his pictures, and all the things she kept of our sainted Marchesino Nino's—only his toys and photographs—these are for the Signor Ninetto—all her own clothes, her furs, everything, everything given away or burnt. And she has not been in her bed for two nights."

Donna Laura, who came to Sappho's drawing-room after dinner, was more gaunt than ever. She looked, Mrs. Roper thought, like an old church that had been gutted by fire.

"I am going to-morrow morning," she said quietly, "and I have come to say good-bye to you."

"Oh, Donna Laura," faltered Sappho, "how can you leave—Nino's baby?"

Donna Laura glanced absently at the child who lay sleeping in his mother's arms. "Life," she answered, "is short, very short. I have many prayers to say."

After a minute she added, "Sappho, you loved my son, and you love his child, and I will pray for you, too."

"Pray that he may grow very strong and well," Sappho said, with a little shiver.

"I will pray for his soul. Only souls matter."

She sat on a yellow brocaded chair, her stiff black clothes and elaborately dressed hair looking almost like iron in high relief against the silk. Milly's heart ached for her.

"I hear your order is a very severe one," she said after a pause, "do not forget the good points of the—the people you pray for, Donna Laura. Of course your prayers will

help Nino, but—any little wrong thing he may ever have done will be easy for God to forgive, because he had a warm heart, because he loved you—and *Sappho*—so deeply."

Donna Laura gazed gloomily at her but did not speak for a long time.

"I will pray," she said at last, "for you, too, though I do not like you. You have been a loose woman, but I have known you to do kind things."

"Donna Laura!" Sappho rose angrily, but Milly pulled her back to the sofa on which they were sitting. "Hush, dearie. Thank you, Donna Laura."

For a few minutes Donna Laura sat silently on the edge of her chair and then she rose.

"Good-bye, Saffò," she said, holding out her hand. Then she bent over the sleeping child, and a dreadful trembling came to her face. "Just like my baby," she muttered, "exactly like my baby."

Sappho was crying quietly, catching the tears in her hand to prevent their falling on Ninetto's face, and the old woman turned to Milly.

"Addio, Signora Roper, addio. God must have laughed when he made us two mothers-in-law to the same man and woman. *Mothers-in-law!*"

She left the room quietly, and Sappho laid the baby on a sofa pillow, and she and her mother wept in almost hysterical pity for the tragic end of the life trouble had broken.

The next day Milly went to look at the chapel, and found it, too, dismantled, swept, and garnished.

"Don Gaetano came yesterday and took the Blessed Sacrament away," Marietta told her, "and the crucifix

and chalice and candlesticks have all gone to his church. Donna Laura said," the woman went on, her red hair gleaming in the autumn sunlight, "that she left the chapel to the mice. Oh, signora, it is the signorino's death that has changed her so, my poor lady! Imagine to yourself her saying that about the mice!"

Sappho arranged the photographs and the toys that had been Nino's in her room, which had become a kind of shrine to his memory. There were dozens of photographs, most of which the jealous mother had never shown to her, and most of which—those in his babyhood—were almost absurdly like Ninetto. For days she lived as if in a dream, arranging, comparing and re-arranging her treasures.

To Mrs. Roper her daughter's new preoccupation was partly a relief, partly a fresh worry, according to the view-point she took for the moment.

Sappho was no longer hanging every second over Ninetto, but, on the other hand, she was strengthening her passion for the child through studying his likeness to his dead father.

For a week or so, however, Ninetto seemed better, but after the first few days Sappho became more normal.

Mrs. Roper, without telling her, invited several people to come in at tea-time on different days, and although Sappho was bored, the result, taken as a whole, seemed good.

Only little Contessa Moretti-Caccia, self-centred and chicken-brained, the mother of a huge, stolid boy twice as big as Ninetto, caused trouble by exclaiming, "Oh, *cari-i-i-i-no*, how lovely he is, but how *delicate-looking!*"

To Sappho her mother explained that it was really

necessary for her, Milly, to see a little of her friends, once in a while, and as, since Donna Laura's departure, Sappho was alone on her floor of the great house, her mother had moved up to her apartment and shared her salotto, so Sappho could not object to an occasional caller.

After a while, when people had got used to Ninetto's aged, mournful expression, they began to rave over his likeness to Nino, and this Sappho enjoyed immensely.

In January the child was seriously ill, and for two days and nights Milly sat by his cradle, literally, as Dr. Avellini expressed it, dragging him back from the jaws of death.

When he was better, Sappho collapsed in a curious, mental way, spending hours crying over Nino's death, prophesying Ninetto's death and her own madness.

"I shall go crazy, doctor," she said, "if my baby dies."

"Your baby is better, and you are very ungrateful to imagine horrors," Avellini said severely.

She looked at him with the gravity that gave such a noble expression to her face.

"It's only that you don't quite understand, dottore. Ninetto isn't only my baby. He is my husband's spirit, too. Si il suo spirito."

The little doctor looked worried and felt her pulse, and Milly went into her small room that had been Nino's dressing-room, and was so much less comfortable than the one in the apartment she had given up, and sat down by the fire.

As time went on, it seemed more and more impossible to tell Sappho that the baby was not hers, and every now and then Charles Bruce, who was planning a trip to

Japan, wrote her very seriously on the subject, begging her not to do what he called "anything so unreasonable."

Donna Laura had been gone nearly three months and would never come back. Would not the wisest thing be for her, Milly, to insist on Sappho and the baby going with her to America for a while? Like many Americans who have lived long out of their own country, Mrs. Roper had no wish to return there for good, but the thought of a stay in the quiet, middle-west town was very pleasant to her.

"We could sail direct from here to New York," she thought, her heart beating a little quicker, "and the voyage might be the making of Ninetto." All that day her mind was busy with the subject.

She did not mention her plan to Sappho at dinner, but as they sat by the fire afterwards she began talking about the old home. "You don't remember the Websters—well they had two pairs of twins, and were awfully kind to me when I was first married. I suppose Carrie and Bessie are grandmothers by now. My, I can smell the grass being squirted in the evening after a scorching day! And the Sunday school picnics. Seventeen kinds of cake there used to be sometimes. I always made maple-cream and cocoanut, my mother's receipts. And the ladies' tea-parties, too! Not what they call teas in England or here, though. Thirty or forty ladies there'd be, four at a table, and the most elegant food. Cream of celery soup and oyster crab patties, and hard shell crabs from Augustin's in Philadelphia, and two or three kinds of ice cream, and hot coffee with cream right straight through the meal!"

"You make me hungry, mother," Sappho smiled. What are oyster crab patties?"

They talked very happily all the evening, Ninetto sleep-

ing quietly in his cradle, and Milly went to bed feeling that she had "paved the way" very successfully for her plan.

"My, it's late," she said, as she kissed Sappho good night, "it's nearly twelve!"

She slept well, and did not awaken till nearly nine. Peeping into Sappho's room, she saw that her daughter, unused as she was to being out of bed after ten, was still sleeping peacefully, a smile on her face.

Slipping across to the table, Mrs. Roper bent down. She would bathe and dress Ninetto before she waked Sappho. "That *will* be a joke," she thought.

She raised the child quietly, and then dropped him back on to his soft pillows. He was dead.

CHAPTER VII

DONNA PALMIRA SACCHETTI tiptoed softly into Milly's room, and closed the door with the elaborate and exasperating precautions of a naturally noisy person trying to be quiet.

"She's asleep," she hissed through her primitive false teeth.

"Thank God," Milly answered dully, sitting up on her bed on which she had been lying. She had not had her clothes off for two nights and was exhausted.

Donna Palmira, who was a bore, but thoroughly kind, had been of great help since the baby's death on Thursday, and Sappho's terrifying collapse, sat down in a small walnut rocking-chair that had accompanied Mrs. Roper to most of the chief European cities and many of the smaller ones, and many of the less important ones, and closed her eyes.

"I do wish you had some *gentleman* to help you, signora," she said, "some relation or very old friend, I mean."

"I've not seen my brothers for nearly twenty years, and neither of them would be of the slightest use, anyhow——"

There was a long pause, during which the snapping of the olivewood fire was the only sound within the thick old walls.

"What time's the doctor coming back?" Milly asked at length, turning over her pillow to find a cool place.

"Not till to-morrow morning. He has explained to me about the powders. He thinks they will keep her drowsy

and quiet, even if she doesn't always sleep—Poveretta," the good old lady added kindly.

Milly looked at her through half-closed eyes. What a bore Donna Palmira, with her cocksuredness and her provinciality and her unpleasant voice, had always seemed to her! But for her horrible Dr. Lemmi, Sappho and Nino might never have quarrelled, and Jeanne never have gained her vulgar, so horribly punished, victory over him. . . . And yet as soon as the news of Ninetto's death and Sappho's mental condition had reached her, the old woman had arrived, an ancient portmanteau in her hand, and taken the brunt of everything on her pillowy old shoulders!

She it was who wrote out and sent the notice to the papers, saw the hundreds of callers—in Donna Laura's dismantled drawing-room into which a few chairs had been put, so that Sappho should not hear voices—chosen and bought the little white coffin, administered the medicine against taking which Sappho had at first fought like a wild thing.

"Kindness itself," Mrs. Roper thought, over and over again. "Kindness itself, one of those depilatory things they advertise in London would take away that awful beard—I must tell her when—when—"

Through the open salotto door came a smell of thick-fleshed white flowers. There, Milly knew, in the cold, stood the little coffin covered with the formal wreaths she thought so ugly. For Ninetto was not only Sappho's—no, *Jeanne's* baby. To Neapolitan society he was the last of the elder branch of the Gamba family. An important person. Yes, an important person, and he was dead.

Sappho, the other side of the other door, was crazy—

or near it. Milly knew that she would never forget her screams when she had first seen the dead child. But the screams had not been so bad as the lethargy that followed them.

Every now and then Sappho had said, "Mother order the car and we three will go for a drive in the Villa. No, not you, just Nino and Ninetto and me."

And her mother had had to leave the room and pretend to telephone to the garage.

Or Sappho would sit up in bed writing long letters to Nino, bidding him come home because the baby was ill. "Nothing dangerous," she would write, "he's *very* strong—a real Gamba like you, *tesoro mio*—but I want you."

These letters she would insist on stamping, and then she would ring, and send them downstairs by the putty-pale butler.

But now she was asleep. Presently a low, snore announced the fact that Donna Palmira was also asleep; unbecomingly, Mrs. Roper saw, with her mouth open, her head leaning against the embroidered "roll" on the back of the chair.

Milly took a drink of what she called lemonade, though she knew English people called it lemonsquash, and rearranged her pillows.

If Sappho was sleeping quietly she might have a warm bath and change her clothes. Her clothes suddenly seemed loathsome to her.

Creeping quietly to her "bureau," she opened it and took out a big pile of mauve-ribboned linen, fine and of simple design, all made by herself. Against the dulling square of the window Donna Palmira's beard stood out in comically high relief.

The bathroom was at the other side of the salotto. If she shut the door the whole long room would be between the running water and Sappho.

She put her big bath sponge in the tub under the taps so that the noise was much deadened, and emptied the remains of a bottle of geranium bath-salts into the quickly deepening water. Sappho liked violet scents and salts and powders, but Milly thought they all smelt of vanilla.

White and slim, her body like that of a sixteen-year-old girl's, she stepped gingerly into the hot water and lay down. *Ah!* That was good. She would feel stronger and better after this.

By sitting up and turning sideways she could see herself in a cupid-framed glass. "Goodness," she whispered, "how plain I'm getting."

Her tired, lined face looked twenty years older than her white, hard body, but she did not care much. "Why shouldn't I look old?" she thought. "I'm nearly fifty." Deliberately she thought about herself to keep her mind off Sappho. "Glad I *didn't* marry any of those fellows now," was the farthest she allowed her musing to go, "for if—if she doesn't get better—at once—I can keep her here. She won't ever be—violent."

Suddenly she broke down and cried into her bath sponge, careful to make no noise.

The funeral was to be the next day, and the day after Dr. Avellini was bringing Professor Perruccio in consultation. The funeral would be awful, and *that* would be awful. "Everything," she whispered, "is awful. Gosh, what a world!"

Just then came a very soft, muffled knock at the door.
"Who's there?"

"Son' io excellenza," said the voice of the butler, "there is a visitor."

"Go and tell Contessa Sacchetti, Paolo; she is in my room."

"But, signora, the gentleman has asked especially for you."

Could it be Charles Bruce? she wondered, only to tell herself decisively that it could not. Bruce was in Japan by now, or on his way there.

"Who is it, Paolo?"

"Don Ottavio Gamba, signora."

Mrs. Roper sat for a moment in the fragrant water thinking. What on earth could Don Ottavio want? He couldn't have come on account of poor little Ninetto, for he knew the truth.

"Oh, all right," she said impatiently after a pause. "Ask Don Ottavio to wait, I shan't be long."

And in a very few minutes, wrapped in the maize-coloured kimona that was the only outside garment she had with her in the bathroom, she was shaking hands with the old man, her gold and silver hair curling tightly from the steam of the bath.

"I've been away," Don Ottavio began at once, "so I've only just heard, signora. I am—deeply sorry for you." And looking into his face she could not doubt it. "I met Emilio Sandella an hour ago and he told me—but what he says doesn't count," he broke off abruptly. "How is Donna Saffò?"

Milly put some wood on the fire, very careful not to make a noise, though the big screen was between them and Sappho's closed door. "It has been a great shock

to her," she said slowly, "and her brain is affected—temporarily."

"Povera anima!"

The old man looked cleaner and less ragged than he had done when she last saw him, but he looked much older and indefinitely needy. "Have you—have you seen the poor little boy?" she asked, glancing at the coffin.

But Don Ottavio shook his head. "No, no grazie," he answered nervously, "I—I do not like seeing the—the dead. I only came to express my sympathy to you. You were kind to me, signora."

He was, she had always known, a horrid old man, but somehow to-day she felt for him only a queer, understanding pity. On a table in a corner was a big silver tray on which stood several kinds of wine, and a crystal jar of the sweet biscuits Italians love. "Will you have red wine or white?" she said simply, going to the tray.

"Lacrima Christi, if there is any there. It is a cold day, and I am no longer very young."

"Neither am I, Don Ottavio. Most people seem to be growing old. Take several biscuits, they are very small."

Don Ottavio spread a crumpled blue-and-white silk handkerchief over his knee, and balanced his biscuits on it. She noticed that he did not eat greedily, as he had done at the little restaurant, and wondered if this was out of respect for the coffin, looking at which he avoided with such care.

The clock struck five, and Milly started. Sappho had been asleep nearly two hours. What if she should wake up all right? In only natural grief?

"Have you heard from my sister-in-law?" Don Ottavio asked indistinctly, his mouth full of biscuit.

"No. I wrote and told her, but I don't think she receives letters. It is one of the strictest of all the orders, Don Gaetano told me."

"I know. An imitation of the Trappists. Still from the Mother Superior's point of view it's the last of the real Gamba who has died—except *me*," he added with an unexpected grin, "and everyone knows that I don't count."

"Well, however that may be, I've had no reply, and the funeral is to-morrow."

Don Ottavio finished his wine and held out his glass to be refilled. Then he asked, as unexpectedly as he had smiled, "What are your plans—for afterwards?"

It was odd, Milly reflected, what a comfort it was to her to talk to this old rascal. "Just because he's a man, I suppose—I always get on better with men."

She told him that her plans depended entirely on Sappho's health.

"You mean her *mind*? What does that old humbug Avellini say?"

"Doctor Avellini isn't a humbug, and he says that—that only time can tell." Her voice shook, and she pretended to cough at the end of her answer.

Don Ottavio's beady eyes were fixed on her face. "Suppose you told her the truth?" he suggested.

"That would send her *really* mad. Professor Perruccio says any shock might—do it."

"H'm! Well, ever since the night I watched through my window and saw my sister-in-law tearing her hair over the *real* baby's body—ever seen anyone *really* tear her hair? One often reads of it, but I'd never seen it till that night—I've been sorry you didn't just tell Saffo. I myself," he went on with another grin, "have found lies

of the greatest possible usefulness, but I'm a Latin as well as a bad old man, and it strikes me like this. English and American people think lies dreadfully wicked, and certainly don't tell as many as Latins do; therefore who knows that they haven't some secret defence—something that's grown to protect them, in the place of lies, against the horrors of truth? There is nothing so horrible as the truth."

Milly stared at him. "I want to go back to America," she said slowly. "*I'm just sick of Europe.*"

The old man rose. "Well, truth is horrible," he observed. "Nine times out of ten it hurts, but—are you sure Saffo hasn't some hidden protection against its hurt? She is very good—"

He had kissed Mrs. Roper's hand and turned to the door, when the bedroom door opened, and Sappho came in. "How do you do," she said politely. "I do hope you haven't waked the baby?" She walked soft-footed to the coffin, and stood looking down at it. "Do you think all these flowers are good for him, mother?" she asked. "I don't. Nino *hates* strong-scented flowers."

Don Ottavio poured out a third glass of wine and carried it carefully to her.

"The flowers won't hurt the baby," he said, "but they'll give you a headache. Sit down by the fire and drink this."

To her mother's amazement Sappho obeyed him, and a moment later he took his leave.

A strong dose of morphine kept Sappho asleep during the funeral, which took place from the room on the pian nobile formerly lived in by Sir Bartle, and when, late

that night, she woke up, she did not notice the absence of the coffin.

Until nearly morning she talked first to her mother, then to Donna Palmira, then to Marietta, who, since Donna Laura's departure, had acted as a kind of house-keeper for her. It seemed to Mrs. Roper that the talking would never cease.

It went on the next day and the next, until the three watchers were utterly exhausted, and it showed no signs of abating.

And always, always, she talked of Nino and Ninetto, who for some reason she imagined to be in Algiers on their way home from a stay in the desert.

"The dry air has cured Ninetto, Nino says," she would say: "there's no damp there; and his legs are so strong, and he runs, and runs—but Nino is homesick. He wants to come home to me."

Again: "Nino says he may not be able to come just yet, but he will send Ninetto, and that will do just as well, for they are each other. Ninetto is Nino and Nino is Ninetto. It's that that makes it so interesting. If one of them never came back I could bear it, because, you see, the one I *had* would be the other. It's like God and Jesus and the Holy Ghost, one in three and three in one—only they are only two."

Dr. Avellini and Professor Perruccio shook their heads over her talk and looked very grave.

"I suppose she has never shown any signs of—violence?" Avellini asked once; and on another day Perruccio said to Mrs. Roper, "Signora, we shall have you ill next. I have a really *very* delightful private establishment for people whose minds are *temporarily*—"

But Milly refused to listen to him.

The days passed, and December came, a warm, bright month like one in the traditional southern winter. Sappho's physical health grew steadily better. She gained weight, and kept well and had a good appetite, but her mind was, if anything, worse. Kind old Donna Palmira had gone home, and an English trained nurse, very much against her will disguised as Mrs. Roper's new maid, had taken her place. She was capable and by no means unsympathetic, but every time she could get Milly alone she would burst into a gush of hasty description of her *real* position in life.

She had an uncle in the navy, and an aunt who had married a baronet. She was also graduate of a big provincial hospital that she declared to be far in advance of the London ones, in the opinion of everyone who knew anything.

Milly, who would not have grudged her relationship with the whole English nobility and both Services, tried hard to be patient with her for Sappho's sake, but never in her life before had she been so continuously bored, and she was bored now almost to the point of screaming.

Sappho, on the contrary, liked "Daphne," for Daphne's training had really been good, and her patience was endless. By the hour she would listen to the young woman's stories of her husband and baby; by the hour she would look at the photographs and pretend to be interested in Nino's old toys.

"When they come back," Sappho would say, "we'll all go to Switzerland together, Daphne, and you can teach

Ninetto to climb mountains. You know, he's over two years old now!"

And Daphne, a high cheek-boned north-country woman, whose name should have been Martha, would nod pleasantly, and show all her false teeth.

One day in January, Mrs. Roper, who had just had a letter from Singapore from Charles Bruce, went to see Professor Perruccio. She found him sitting in a stuffy, much upholstered room, with his wife and a mangy parrot, and Signora Perruccio at once left them.

"Professor," Milly said, throwing back her veil, and, in her earnestness speaking in her most middle-west way, "I've come to ask you a question."

"Bene, signora," the old man answered, looking at her kindly.

Milly cleared her throat. "And you'll tell me the truth?"

"Signora, I *never* lie—professionally."

"All right. Then—is my daughter going to get well?"

There was a pause, during which the professor shifted his velvet-slipped feet and brushed some crumbs from the folds in his waistcoat.

"You mean mentally, of course?"

Mrs. Roper nodded. "Of course. She's perfectly well physically, except that I suppose her heart's weak."

The silence that followed seemed to her to last for hours, but finally the old man said quietly, "It is, cara signora, entirely in the hands of God."

"Then—she may stay—as she is now, practically insane?"

"There is certainly a possibility of her doing so, but she is very young, and——"

"Is there nothing you can suggest? Nothing you can do? Nowhere we could go—for baths, or—or something?"

The professor shook his head. "I know of nothing but patience and time." He shook hands very kindly with her, and she went slowly home through the sunlit, gay streets.

She found Sappho cutting out a pair of little trousers for Ninetto, and much amused because Daphne called them "trews." "Isn't it a ridiculous word?" the girl cried. "But won't he be a darling in these? Nino says he's too big to wear those long tunics any longer."

That evening Daphne went to the opera, Milly having had a rest in the afternoon, and as she and Sappho sat over the fire after dinner Milly tried to persuade her to go to America.

"We wouldn't stay long, but—it would do us both good pettie."

Sappho laughed. "I don't need a change. I'm very well now—I'm afraid Nino will even think I'm too fat. He *hates* fat women, you know."

The night was very still and though they had a fire for cosiness, one of the big windows was open, behind its velvet curtain.

Once in a while Marietta would come into the bedroom for a moment, and then go out again, switching off the light at the door.

"I do hope Marietta won't wake baby," Sappho said once.

She was sewing busily on the little white velveteen knickers, a happy smile on her face.

Mrs. Roper was reading "Little Dorrit" aloud to her. Presently, in the quiet, Milly heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs and laid down her book. It was too early for Daphne—who could it be? It sounded like a man's step. Could it possibly be Bruce? Then the door opened and a tall, old nun came in. To Milly's untrained eye she looked like any other nun, but there was a difference, and the skull-like face was that of Donna Laura.

Sappho, glancing up at her mother, turned sharply and looked at the door.

"Oh," she cried, "you have come from Nino?"

Donna Laura, whose girdle-rosary of immense black wooden beads clicked together as she walked, approached the fire stiffly, reminding Milly absurdly of the statue of the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*. "Yes, my child," she said, with simplicity and apparent good faith, "I have come from my son, and my grandson."

After a moment she added to Mrs. Roper: "We are the two mothers-in-law, signora, but I wish to see Saffo alone. Come with me first for one minute in here."

She went to the bathroom door, and Milly, thinking she had, in her queer mental condition, mistaken it for that of the bedroom, followed her.

"I have come to cure your daughter," the old woman said, wrinkling her big nose with distaste at the smell of bath-salts and powder in the little tiled room. "Only I can cure her. Sit down."

Mrs. Roper sat down, and before she could jump up the door was locked on her and she was alone.

The bathroom was in reality a lightly boarded-off corner

of the big salotto, and after a moment of useless banging at the door and calling to Sappho, who paid no attention to her cries, Mrs. Roper found that by sitting quiet she could hear every word that Donna Laura was saying.

"I had much trouble in getting permission to come," Donna Laura explained. "But my brother-in-law, after explaining to Reverend Mother, got one of the monsignori to speak to the Holy Father himself."

"Yes, yes; but tell me how is Nino?" Sappho broke in. "Be *still*, mother," she added, as Milly again battered at the door. "Tell me about Nino and Ninetto."

"Nino is dead. He has been dead for two years. Use your brains," Donna Laura said harshly, "and remember."

There was a short silence, during which Mrs. Roper heard Donna Laura pouring out wine and carrying it to her daughter-in-law.

"Don't you remember, Saffò? He died two years ago last June. Ah, I see that you *do* remember. That is good."

Mrs. Roper rose and opened the bathroom window, for her head was reeling.

"Every day and every night," Donna Laura went on, "I pray for him. You must learn to pray. Your mother has been a lewd woman, but you must be good."

"Don't you *dare* say anything against my mother," Sappho cried. "My mother is an angel. Oh, oh," and she began to cry.

"Just like her to have the window open in January," muttered the old woman, and Mrs. Roper heard a bang. "There! Never mind your mother. My brother-in-law, Ottavio Gamba, told me about the baby, too."

Mrs. Roper, her ice-cold hands holding the lintels of

the door, waited for the answer. It came quietly. "Hush," Sappho said, "or you'll wake him. I want Marietta."

But Marietta had gone down to the porter's lodge for a chat, and Paola, the butler, out. No one came.

"Nino's dead, I tell you," repeated Donna Laura.

Milly Roper could never remember what she called out through the slight door, or whether or not she pounded on the panels. All she could recall was that she had been locked in and could not get out, but that she heard every word Donna Laura and Sappho said.

As if, already, some pressure on her brain had relaxed, Sappho was crying wildly. There was, in spite of the pain it gave her, something in the sound that reassured her mother.

After a while the sobbing stopped. "You are cruel," Sappho said, "to tell me like that, but—I—I believe you—I seem to remember. Only," she added, with the sly laugh that her mother had never been able to get used to, "he's not *really* dead. No one who leaves a child is really dead. I have Ninetto and Ninetto is Nino."

"The baby," returned Donna Laura, in a measured voice, "is dead, too."

"It's a lie, it's a lie!" Sappho screamed, and she ran round and round the salotto and her bedroom looking, calling for the child.

"Let me out, Donna Laura," Mrs. Roper cried, jumping against the lower panels with all her force, "you will kill her. Let me out!"

"Hush!" replied Donna Laura, close to the door. "I am curing her. *Zitto!*"

"Where's my baby? Where's my baby—oh, Donna

Laura," Mrs. Roper heard her daughter cry, "he's not only my baby, he's your baby, too. He's Nino!"

"Sit down, Saffò, and listen to me," Donna Laura answered quietly. "I am telling you the truth. Listen!"

After a moment broken only by Sappho's moans, Mrs. Roper heard the old woman's voice go on.

"Your baby," she said, "died when it was born. I put a living child—the child of two peasants—in its place, to save your reason. Don Gaetano, Marietta, and I, buried your baby—he was baptized—near my son's grave. They are together. But they are dead."

Mrs. Roper in the silence that followed reached for a bottle of bath ammonia and sniffed at it to keep her senses from floating away altogether.

"A few weeks ago," went on the inexorable voice, "the little stranger baby died. He was rickety, always ill, no more like my Nino than a—a jelly-fish is like a lion. It is good that he died. He was a—nobody—a bastard."

"He—he looked like Nino," Sappho faltered, in a voice of utter, but sane, exhaustion.

"All young southern babies look alike. All young Anglo-Saxon babies look alike."

Another pause, and then Donna Laura rose and unlocked the bathroom door.

"Mother—oh, mother, is it true?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Roper.

Donna Laura looked from one to the other in a peculiar way. "I am going back now to my cell, where my bed is too short for me to stretch out on, where it is cold in winter and hot in summer, where my washing basin is no bigger than the thing you empty your tea-cups in, and where—I am happy. I am full of sin, *every* one is full of

sin, but Our Lady hears my prayers. My prayers for the Gamba men."

"Will you not spend the night, and rest, and have some food?"

The old woman thrust out a bare foot in a sandal worn nearly to fringes.

"No! she cried with a kind of exaltation. "I have walked here—two days and a night, and I will walk back."

"Oh, Donna Laura!"

"Do not call me by that name. I am Sor Maria della Croce. I am the meanest of God's creatures, but my prayers are heard. Good-bye," she said at the door, "I have cured you, Saffò. Your mother was coddling you into insanity, but I—I have cut the sore. Good-bye, Saffò. Good-bye, signora—we have been strange mothers-in-law!"

She was gone and hours had passed. Daphne had returned, and after a short explanation from Mrs. Roper, changed the linen on their two beds and gone to sleep in the small room. The city clocks had struck eleven, twelve, one, two and three, and still the mother and daughter sat over the fire and talked.

"Now that I know it all," Sappho said at last, "I see that I have been very selfish, darling."

"You have been very ill, pettie."

"I—it will take me a long time to get used to the idea that my precious little baby wasn't mine."

"He was *some* woman's precious little baby," Milly returned prosaically, and you loved him and he loved you. I don't think love is ever wasted."

"My love for Nino certainly wasn't. If I live to be a hundred," the girl said slowly, in a way that would have

carried conviction to the most sceptical, "I could never—not *forget* him—that's of course—but never love him one bit less."

"No, I don't think you ever could, dearie."

"What did my *real* baby look like?" came after a pause.

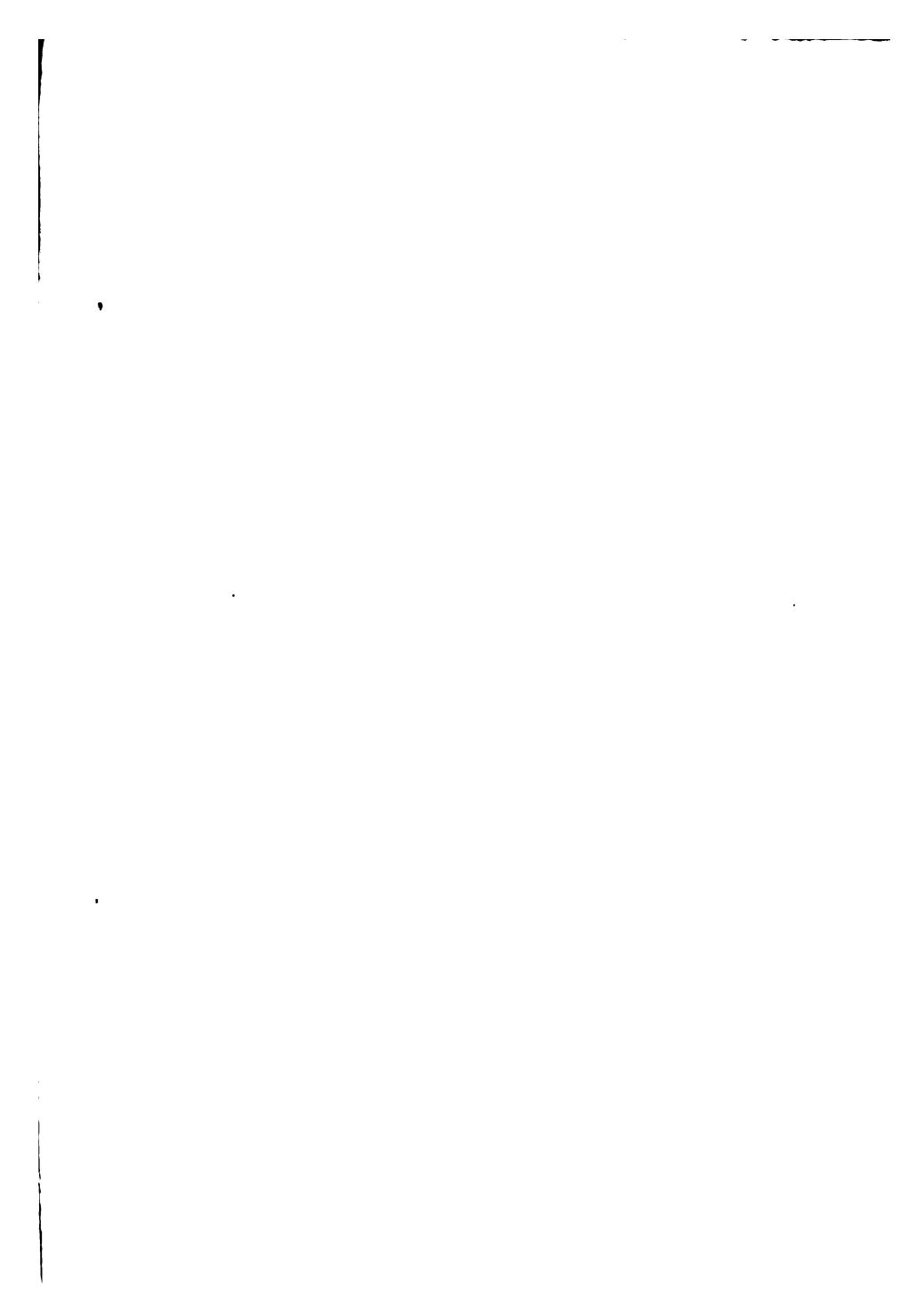
"He was smaller and prettier and had curly hair. I—I have a lock of it for you."

"Oh, mother!"

Milly Roper took her child in her arms. "That's right, dearie," she said, "just you have a real good cry."

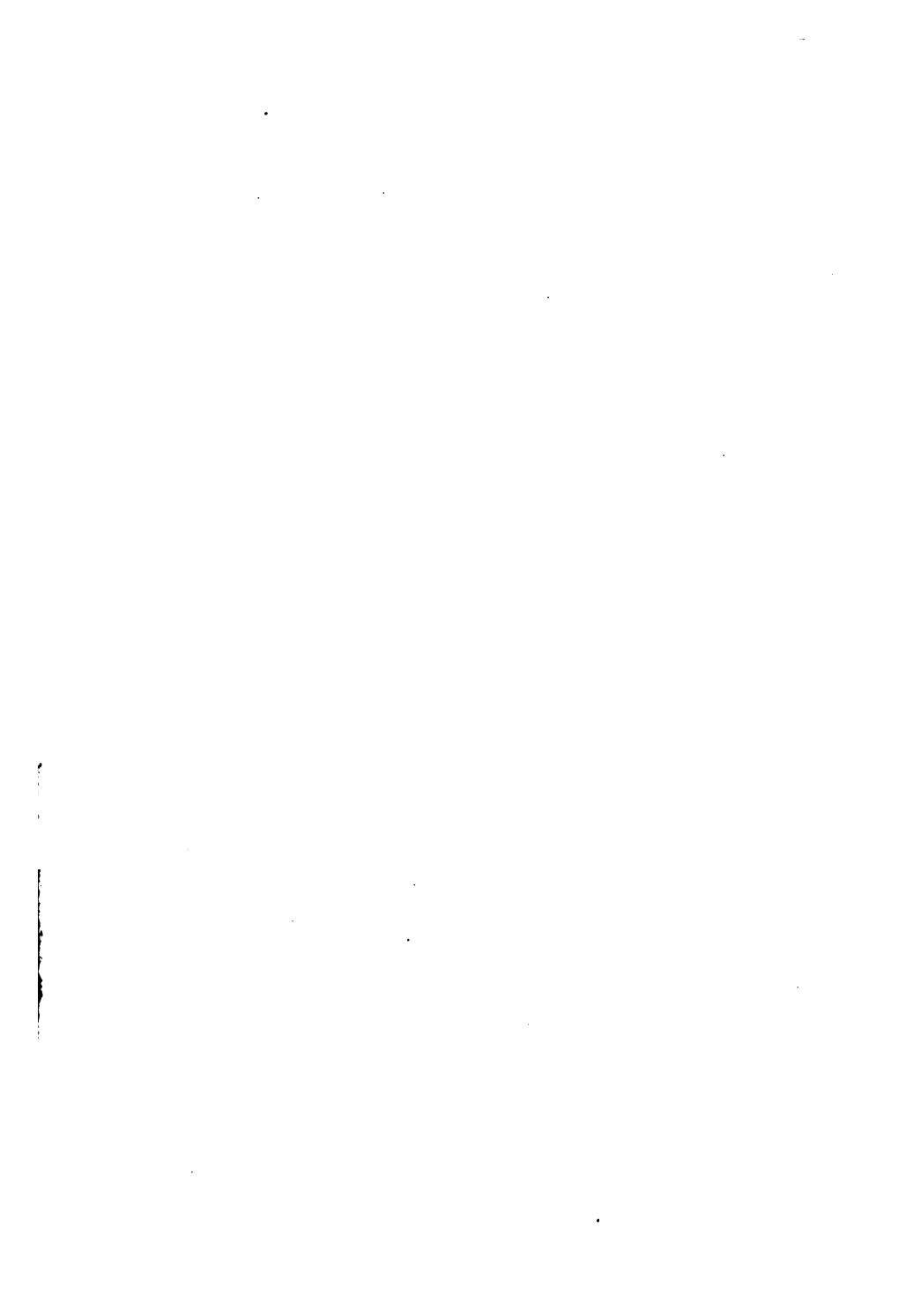
THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE.—I have not been in Naples for a quarter of a century, and, having no guide-book here in Oberammergau, I have been obliged to invent the names of the streets and churches in this story. Donna Laura and Nino are, however, real Neapolitans, though not drawn from life. B. v. H.









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